

# Among the Stars

by Song Of A Free Heart

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Summary: SCI-FI AU The crew of the Night Fury - Hiccup Haddock (captain), Merida Haddock (first mate), and Jack Frost (Pilot) - have a habit of getting into trouble. Accidentally rescuing Princess Rapunzel of the planet Corona puts them in more trouble than they can deal with... unless Jack can admit he was wrong. The requested expansion of my submission for day 3 of Jackunzel Week.

## 1. Chapter 1

\*\*After Jackunzel Week, I promised a follow up to the story I wrote for day three "a sci-fi story with Jack as a space pilot, and Rapunzel as a princess he, Hiccup and Merida had "accidentally" save from Empress Gothel. The idea was a lot of fun to write, and several people expressed interest in the follow up/expansion. So, here you go. This story could also be called "How To Rescue A Princess By Accident". But I think "Among The Stars" works better.\*\*

\*\*I do not own \*\*\_\*\*Rise of the Guardians, Tangled, Brave, \*\*\_\*\*or \*\*\_\*\*How To Train Your Dragon\*\*\_\*\* "they are each the property of their respective owners. \*\*

\*\*This is dedicated to Eva Maverx, who didn't let me rest until this was done.\*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

### Chapter 1

Imperial Center consisted of two planets, both orbiting the same sun, with three moons between them.

One, Pallash I, was all business "departments, the senate building, the palace, and everything else you would expect in a capital. It was so eaten up with skyscrapers, air traffic and ship dockings, that no one could really remember what kind of habitat it

had been.

The second, Pallash II, was lush and beautiful, covered in the sprawling grounds and mammoth houses of the highest ranking officials in the Empire.

Pallash II had only three cities on the entire planet (one on each continent), mainly for the purpose of supplying the houses with necessities and luxuries â€" mainly the latter.

He and Merida Haddock stood in the town square of the largest town square, waiting for Hiccup. Neither he nor Merida would argue that her husband was the only one of them really capable of handling the business end of their work. Merida's temper was too short; Jack didn't have the necessary attention span.

His hands were buried deep in his pockets as he looked up and down the street with thinly veiled disgust. He had seen too much poverty and suffering in the Empire to be all right with the sickening greed of its higher officials.

Beside him he heard the familiar crack of Merida biting into an apple. When he glanced over, he saw her looking up at the statue of the empress that stood in the center of the square.

It was the same statue that had been raised in the capital cities of every planet in the Empire. She wore a wide smile, a long burgundy dress, her hair in tight black curls. Her arms were open, and it was probably supposed to look motherly. But it always sent a shiver down Jack's spine.

"Don't ya think it's creepy how she never gets any older?" Merida asked, accent thickened by the chunk of fruit in her mouth.

"She spends everything on beauty treatments," he said. "Money that should be spent on improving the lives of the citizens she claims to care so much about."

A nearby door opened, and they both glanced over as Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III came toward them, his face too grim for Jack's liking.

"\_Please\_ tell me they paid us," Jack said, dread unfurling in the pit of his stomach.

"They did."

"Then what's wrong?" Merida asked, wariness creeping into her tone.

"The entire planet is on lockdown," Hiccup said. "If we want to leave, we have to get a pass from Air Traffic Control."

Jack withdrew a hand from a pocket to push hair from his eyes. "Pallash II is on lockdown?"

Pallash I would be impossible to lockdown, with all the ships coming and going at all hours of the night. But a lockdown was to keep something in, and Pallash II kept such tight control over who came in, it was impossible to imagine the \_need\_ for a lockdown.

It wasn't as bad as Jack had thought (the passcode wouldn't be too hard to get), but it wasn't good, either.

Even so, he couldn't bite back: "I told you we shouldn't have taken this job."

"It was this, or mortgage the ship to pay for the repairs," Hiccup reminded. "After often as we're short on money, that didn't seem like a good idea."

"And I seem to recall you being the one that made that point," Merida reminded, looking at Jack.

Sometimes Jack wished he didn't work with his two best friends. They knew him too well – including that even he would admit this job had been the lesser of two evils.

Merida's expression didn't let up until he had nodded – acknowledging that she was right. He tried not to let her satisfied smirk grate his nerves too much.

The three started toward Imperial Tower, the single skyscraper on the entire planet. All government business took place there – air traffic control, sanitation, health, etc. It also served as the planet's prison. All in 120 stories of durasteel and transparisteel.

It was a short walk, mostly silent aside from Merida finishing off her apple.

When they reached Imperial Tower, the transparisteel door slid open, and Jack grimaced. He buried his hands in his pockets, to hide they were clenched until his knuckles were white.

He had hoped to never enter another imperial building as long as he lived. So much for that.

The smell was sterile, the walls smooth blue-white, the floor highly polished marble. The one thing he could say for it was that the cool air was just the temperature he liked. Though it was probably there to make people uncomfortable.

"Please hand over all weapons and electronic devices." A bored official droned. "Then fill out the form on the datapod on the other side of the body scanner."

Hiccup went first – by unspoken rule – dropping his blaster and vibroblade on the tray without any visible sign of reluctance. There was reluctance when it came to his commlink, the security remote for the ship, his datapod and other devices.

Merida, glaring all the while, dripping in the two blasters from her belt, the small blaster she kept in her left boot, the vibroblade from her right boot, the dagger from her belt, and the throwing knife strapped to her left forearm under her long sleeve. Her commlink was thrown in as an afterthought.

Jack supposed the horror on the faces of both officials offered him enough amusement to make this trip bearable. And everything Merida

had thrown in was nothing compared to the arsenal in the hidden compartment behind her closet.

She glanced up and looked at the official with mock innocence that almost sent Jack into a fit of laughter.

"It's a dangerous galaxy, boys," she said, and he could tell she was pushing her accent on purpose. "A girl's gotta be careful."

Jack bit back a complaint as he handed over his blasters, commlink, knife, code cylinder, data drive, datapod, and his comm-jammer. That got a raised eyebrow, and he had a feeling he wouldn't be seeing the device again.

He started toward the body scanner.

"Sir, your gauntlet," the official said, no longer looking bored.

Jack held up his left arm, on which was the silver gauntlet, a snowflake design pressed into the front. "Does this look like a weapon or a device?"

With a sigh, he was waved through.

There was no response from the scanner, and it was hard not to smirk. On the off chance he ever went back to Warren, he really would have to thank Tooth again. Some people just knew how to give the best gifts.

Air traffic was on the forty-seventh floor, and all four of the lifts were in use or somewhere else, so the friends ended up waiting in hall.

The indicator light above one of the lift door lit up, and they headed toward it, waiting for the door to slide open. A moment later it did so, revealing two officials in what appeared to be a heated conversation.

"It's not your job to question an order - especially not one from Her Majesty. If those-

The speaker realized he had an interested audience and immediately fell silent. Both officials exited quickly, with a disapproving glance back, and the three friends stepped into the lift.

"Somethin' ain't right," Merida murmured, as soon as the door had shut and the lift had started moving.

"Don't say that," Jack groaned, rubbing a hand over his face. "Just don't."

"Are ya sayin' ya don't feel it?" Merida asked, tone scathing.

Jack gave a non-committal shrug.

Merida looked at her husband, but Hiccup held up his hands hand defense.

"Hey, I'm not the one with all the... ya know," he waved his fingers.

"You guys are the ones with the- the sixth sense, or whatever ya wanna call it."

Merida rounded back to Jack.

"Of course I feel it!" he snapped, keeping his voice low. "But every time you say that, we end up running for our lives! I'm not really in the mood at the moment. Not on Pallash II."

#

By the time Hiccup had their pass from air traffic control, Merida's words had eaten a hold through Jack's resolution to ignore the nagging sensation at the back of his mind.

He followed the couple out, thinking as he did. The moment the door of air traffic control had shut behind them, he touched their shoulders and nodded down a side hall, rather than the way back to the lift.

"What are ya doin'?" Merida hissed.

"If we die, it's your fault," was all the response he gave her, glancing back to make sure there was no one else around.

They turned down a few more deserted halls before Jack found one that had what he was looking for.

"Jack, what are you doing?"

Jack stepped up to the computer terminal embedded in the wall. "Merida's right."

He lifted the metal plate from the top of his gauntlet. From the hidden compartment, he withdrew a transparent red computer card, the Imperial crest emblazoned on one corner.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"Schoolboy secret," Jack smirked.

Hiccup shook his head, covering his eyes with his hands. "You two are crazy."

Still grinning, Jack slid the card into the terminal, and watched the lines of characters sliding down the screen as the card hacked into the system.

Hiccup, the computer savvy one of the group, couldn't resist his curiosity, and eventually stepped closer to watch over Jack's shoulder.

"How far in are you going?"

"I can't get full clearance, but it should be-"

\_Access granted\_ blinked across the screen.

Jack touched the screen, navigating through pages of orders and information, eyes skimming the words in search of anything that might

explain what was going on.

He finally found something out of the ordinary.

"Merida, have you heard of Corone?"

"Aye. It's not far from DunBroch â€" they're one o' our trade partners."

Jack frowned, fingers hovering over the tab for the next page... his eyes fixed on the words. "What are their loyalties?"

"Technically they're part o' the Empire, but they aren't afraid t' undermine Gothel when they can. Why?"

"Princess Rapunzel-" He couldn't resist. "What kind of a name is that?"

Merida shrugged.

"She's here," he said. "Scheduled to be executed tonight... unless her parents agree to a new trade agreement." He looked back. "Any idea what that means?"

"Corona's a farmin' planet," she said. "They trade food t' the poorer planets at reasonable rates. I'm guessin' Goth doesn't like that."

"Apparently," Jack muttered.

"They can't excute her over \_that\_," Hiccup said. "Gothel's blackmailing her parents."

"And when have we ever been the kind to overlook blackmail and corruption?" Jack sighed.

The other two didn't need to answer that.

"Level 70, cell 1138." He pulled up the card menu, hit scramble to hide his tracks, and withdrew the card. There was no question what they were going to do.

He looked at Hiccup. "You're the captain."

Hiccup considered, running a hand through his already tousled hair. "It won't be easy. All three of us have to check out through the front door â€" and they're not going to let us waltz out with a prisoner."

"It's not about easy," Jack murmured, recalling the phrase North had repeated to him so many times. "It's about if it's worth it."

"We can't \_not\_ do it," Merida said.

Hiccup nodded. "All right."

Jack sighed inwardly.

They were going to end up running for their lives. He just knew it.

**\*\*Oh my gosh, it's done? It's just the first chapter, but still! There were a couple points where I thought I wasn't going to get this done!\*\***

**\*\*Not to mention this is my second post today! I promise I will be getting to **\*\*\_\*\*Dragon Guardian\*\*\_\*\*** VERY SOON! But I wanted to get this first chapter up sooner than later.\*\***

## 2. Chapter 2

**\*\*I got distracted... which is why this chapter took so long. Sorry...\*\***

**\*\*Considering this story borrows a lot of elements from **\*\*\_\*\*Star Wars\*\*\_\*\***, did any of you notice the hint last chapter that Jack and Merida are Force sensitive? \*\***

**\*\*You guys' response to this story has been so amazing, I'm truly grateful!\*\***

\_Among the Stars\_

\_Chapter 2\_

With the celebration at the palace, anyone who could be spared had been called away to assist with preparations and security. As a result, Imperial Tower was running on a skeleton crew. And for the first (and probably only) time in his life, Jack was glad for one of Gothel's parties. Still furious at the extravagance, but glad for the window of opportunity.

He didn't see anyone as he took one of the service lifts to the 70th floor.

Hiccup and Merida were on a pointless trip to renew their Imperial Shipping License. They couldn't actually renew it for another couple months, but Jack really just needed them to do something that would allow an excuse for them to stay in the tower long enough for him to get the princess.

He still couldn't believe he was going through with this...

As he neared the cell block, he opened the hidden compartment of his gauntlet again and pulled out the data jammer.

The computer card was a souvenir of his time in the Imperial Flight Academy â€" a school boy's secret, as he had told Hiccup. But this had come with the gauntlet.

Sometimes he wondered what kind of life Toothiana had thought he would lead, considering what her goodbye gift had consisted of. Of course, he had used all of the tools over the years, so maybe his friend just knew him well.

The jammer would set all the cameras within one hundred feet into a 45 second loop.

It allowed him to get to the cell block undetected, but it hardly

made his job easier. He still had to get into the cell block. Guards and officials weren't as easy to get past.

Distracting the guards was plausible, but risky. He had to get the princess out without sending the tower into high alert, and without them getting the slightest inclination to call for backup.

"This is not how this job was supposed to go," Jack muttered to himself.

Taking another side step, so he wouldn't be seen while he thought, a cool draft of air wafted over him.

Jack looked up, and felt a grin tug at his lips. This might be easier than he'd thought " provided all went according to the plan forming in his mind.

From his belt he took his ascension cord. With one more cautious glance toward the cell block door, he threw one end of the line.

The magnet at the end stuck fast to the ceiling, a few inches from the edge of the air vent that was blowing cool air over his face, tousling his hair. The vent itself was easily twice his shoulder width, so he knew there would be enough space for him in the air ducts.

With the ascension line clipped to his belt once more, he hit the recoil button.

Bless North and his tinkering. Jack had no idea how the tiny device was able to lift his weight and carry him to the ceiling, but he was grateful.

Suspended in the air just below the vent, Jack took the screwdriver from his belt and undid the single screw in the hinged vent. When the small piece of durasteel was in his hand, he carefully lowered to vent so it wouldn't slam into the wall. He would have to leave it open, and hope the side hallway was dim enough no one would notice until he was long gone.

Hope wasn't something he liked to trust in too much. But sometimes, like now, it was the only option.

He grabbed the inner edge of the vent and pulled himself up into the duct.

While he unhooked the cable from the ceiling that was now below him, he called back the layout of the cellblock. The map he'd looked at was simple, but he hadn't planned to be inside the crawl space.

There were several dozen ways this could go wrong, just off the top of his head.

The duct veered off in several directions, and he headed to the right " the direction of cell block. If it was set up like the cell blocks in every other Imperial facility, there should be a cent in each cell. He just had to figure out which was cell 1138.

The first vent he came to was above the guard station " as were the



next two. Through the grates Jack saw two bored looking officials and three troopers in their full body black armor. Behind their helmets it was impossible to read their expressions. But their body language mirrored the official's boredom.

"So glad I got out," Jack muttered under his breath.

He continued to crawl forward, sliding his hands and knees across the bottom of the duct to avoid any sounds that might be loud enough to catch the Imperials' attention. Bored as they were, they would probably jump at anything out of place.

If his guess was right, he could count seven vents, turn left, and then the third one would be the princess's cell.

When he reached the vent, he risked speaking. There was probably some security in the cell, but the jammer would work on microphones as well cameras.

"Hey."

He heard movement in the cell, a good sign.

A moment later, a young woman appeared under the vent, looking up at him with wide green eyes. She was slender, long hair a golden blond, and younger than he had expected. She couldn't be more than eighteen, if that. Pretty, too. Though he had a feeling that was required of royalty.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"You're Rapunzel?" he asked, aware of the seconds ticking by that he did not have time to waste.

She nodded slowly.

A few deft movements and he lowered the grate, again careful not to let it bang against anything.

"I'm Jack Frost," he said. "I'm here to rescue you."

He kicked himself mentally. That couldn't have sounded more ridiculous if he had tried.

"Come on, there isn't much time."

He held his hands down to her.

She hesitated a moment, and Jack recognized a wariness of strangers. But then she nodded and reached up to take his hands. Her palms were soft against his calloused touch. She was also light, so lifting her into the vent was small work.

What caught his attention was her hair. He had noticed the color, and that it was long, but he hadn't noticed that it was endless. Even with her in the duct, the ends of her hair still hung half way between the ceiling and the floor.

"You have got to be kidding me."

He hadn't planned for that, and knew it could cause problems for the plan he did have. Rather, the plan he was still trying to throw together.

"Is all that necessary?" he asked, gesturing to the golden strands she was pulling up through the vent.

"Yes," was her inarguable answer. She was a royal; it was obvious in her tone.

So much for just cutting it off...

Jack wanted to ask how in the universe twenty feet of hair could be 'necessary'... but enough time around Merida, and other women, had taught him to just not ask when it came to women and their habits. He had just accepted that they were crazy and impractical.

"Okay," he sighed. "Follow me. And try not to make too much noise."

She just nodded.

When Jack had secured the grate back into place, he nodded to the left. It would be best not to go back the way he had come, since he had no idea if the princess was capable of being quiet.

In that aspect, at least, he was pleasantly surprised. She was nearly silent as she crawled behind him. The loudest sound was her hair sliding across the floor, which wouldn't be loud enough to hear outside the duct.

A couple times he had to pause to consult his memory of the layout.

"This should be it," he said finally, hoping he was right.

"What about the security cameras?" she asked.

Jack lowered the grate carefully before he answered. "I got it."

He took her hands the way he had to get her out of her cell and lowered her into the hallway beneath them. He jumped down a moment later, glancing up and down the hallway. Nothing was out of place (no officials or troopers in sight). And behind them, just as he had calculated, was another service lift. The Imperials were predictable, if nothing else.

Jack hit the down button. His lips twitched in a grin that they gotten this far. Maybe they wouldn't end up running for their lives this time.

Still, while they waited he checked that his ascension cable was back on his belt. His mind went over his plan again and again, checking for obvious flaws, or better ideas.

When the door slid open he ushered her into the lift, taking a deep breath to calm his nerves. They were almost out.

He hit the button for the second floor.

The lift descended in tense silence for nearly twenty stories before Jack's manners caught up with him.

"Are you all right?" he asked, glancing over at her.

Rapunzel's eyes were straight ahead. Her shoulders rose and fell with her breathing... but she nodded. Both her hands were clenched around a lock of her hair.

"I guess," she murmured.

"Why are you here?" she asked, after a few more tense moments.

Jack glanced over and grinned dryly. "Technically, making a delivery of supplies for the latest party Gothel is throwing."

When he looked over, he saw fury in her eyes. In that expression, he saw that her concern wasn't for herself, but for her people.

Well, at least she wasn't a spoiled brat, like most of the royals he had met.

The door of the lift opened to an empty hall on the second floor. Jack glanced right and left, to be sure, then gestured for the princess to follow him.

"The second floor is where they store hard copies of information, in case the datapods crash," he explained, so the silence wouldn't drive either of them crazy. "Electric security is the strongest, but there's rarely anyone here."

Just to be careful, he checked the jammer to be sure it was still working.

He led her to one of the large windows in the center of the hall. "You're not afraid of heights, are you?"

"No."

He nodded; glad this would be that much easier.

Once more he opened his gauntlet and pulled out one of the last tools Toothiana and North had bestowed on him. It was a small, flat blade, only a few inches long, and appeared to be made of glass, or some kind of crystal. There was a faint yellow tint to the otherwise clear substance.

He noticed Rapunzel eyeing it curiously.

"It's rathia," he said.

He slid the blade into the narrow space before the window frame and the window jam. As he slid it from one end to the other, he felt the tug and pull of wires cleanly sliced by the razor sharp edge. Imperial predictability again.

"It's mined from the volcanoes on Warren, and processed in the nearby caves. Once it hardens, it's virtually indestructible, and it can cut through almost anything."

He jumped up on the window ledge and continued to cut the trip wires on the sides. The top of the window was above his head, but the length of the blade was enough to reach the wires inside. He looked back at the princess with a grin.

"I say 'almost', but I've yet to find something it couldn't cut personally. I just know there are a few substances throughout the universe." Almost for emphasis, he pushed the window open.

A cool, flower scented breeze wafted over them, and he saw Rapunzel's eyes widen, a smile tugging at her lips. It was probably the first time she'd seen the sun since she'd been captured " and Jack was glad for the first time that he'd helped her. She seemed to revitalize as she took a deep breath.

Jack held a hand out, smiling at the life shining in her eyes. She returned his smile, stepping nimbly onto the ledge next to him.

"Down there is the royal gardens," he said, nodding in the direction of the flowering plants between the palace and Imperial Tower. "I have to go check out at the front, so I need you to hide in the gardens until I get there."

As he spoke he took the ascension line from his belt. He fiddled with the settings briefly so it was adjusted for her weight, then leaned out the window. The magnet fired and latched onto the ledge above them.

Turning back, he handed the device to the princess.

"Use this to get down. When you're on the ground, this button will release the magnet, this one will recoil it."

"Okay." She nodded, and accepted it.

Jack was surprised to feel his heart clench as her fingers wrapped around the small cylinder.

"Be careful with it," he said, his voice tight. "It can't be replaced."

"I'll take care of it," she said. "I promise."

If she thought him strange for being so sentimental about the small device, she gave no sign of it. Her smile was gentle and reassuring.

He could only nod. He remembered all the times he had used the ascension cable to climb up and down the Sunset Mountains on Warren. He had rarely needed it to actually carry him, just as a safety line " since everyone had lectured him for a solid hour when they had caught him scaling one of the cliffs without protection.

"Are you all right?" Rapunzel asked.

Jack nodded slowly. Taking a deep breath, he swallowed.

"When you get to the ground, run to the garden and hide,"

He pulled the last device from his gauntlet â€" a small tracker. The screen to track it was on the inside of the gauntlet itself. North was very much about practicality.

"Don't lose this, its how I'll find you."

She nodded, and slipped it into the pocket of her dress.

In his mind, Jack went over his plan one last time, making sure there wasn't anything else he needed to give her in the way of advice or technology. But he couldn't think of anything.

"Go," he said. "I'll stay here until you reach the garden."

Rapunzel hesitated a moment, then stepped out the window. With the help of the cable, she glided smoothly down.

She paused just long enough to hit one of the buttons on the ascension cable before she started running across the grass without a glance back. Jack rolled his eyes at her failure to follow the simple instruction... then reached out and caught the gadget just before it whizzed past his nose.

Jack couldn't bite back a grin as he caught it, realizing she had known exactly what she was doing in getting it back into his hands.

Looking up, he watched her disappear among the trees that formed the perimeter of the garden.

He flipped up the top of his gauntlet and turned on the small screen to be sure it was tracking her movements.

\*\*Okay, I wanted that to be a little longer... but I'm glad it's finally done. \*\*

\*\*Please review â€" I would like to know what you guys think!\*\*

### 3. Chapter 3

\*\*Chapter 3! I was nervous about the space battle, so I put it off for about five days. But it was actually pretty easy. I'm not sure how good it is, so you guys will have to let me know. \*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 3\_

"How'd it go?" Merida asked, the moment Jack joined them outside the lift on the 45th floor.

Jack shook his head. He had turned off the data jammer, and was now reluctant to say anything that could compromise what was still a delicate situation.

"Let's just get out of here," he muttered.

His friends looked at him with a hundred questions, but Hiccup nodded and pushed the down button for the lift.

"What about you guys?" he asked, trying to relax. It had been less stressful when the princess was a step behind him. Now he didn't even know where she was, or what was happening. He was more concerned than he had expected.

And his friends could see it. His fingertips beat a steady tattoo against the hardened leather of his empty blaster holster.

"Merida threw a fit â€" we renewed our license," Hiccup said with a grin.

Merida crossed her arms over her chest, rolling her eyes. "Long as we're here, we might as well get \_somethin'\_ done."

Normally Merida would have just returned her husband's grin, and Jack would have to look away at the sheer love rolling off of them.

But for several weeks now, she hadn't been her normal self. Jack was getting used to it â€" but it still annoyed him.

She shot Jack a look that demanded an answer to her veiled question.

Jack lifted a hand to scratch his upper lip.

"We did," he whispered, mouth covered by his palm.

The door of the lift slid open. The forty-five story trip down was all but silent except for their breathing.

The official at the door was still bored, but stepped safely out of Merida's way as she returned her weapon to their places.

But the other officials no longer looked bored. They were almost buzzing with an anxiety that was almost palpable.

Two troopers now stood guard in the lobby, blaster rifles held at the ready.

Either Empress Gothel herself had shown up, or they had realized the hostage princess â€" their bargaining chip â€" was gone. Of course, if the latter was true, the former was all the more probable.

Either way, they were running out of time.

Jack slammed his blaster into its holster with more force than he'd intended.

Finally, they made it outside.

The pressure on his lungs eased a little at making it out, past the first obstacle. But they wouldn't be safe until they made the jump to lightspeed.

"She had twenty feet of hair," Jack said, as they went down the steps of Imperial Tower. "I have no idea what to do with that."

"Where is she?" Hiccup asked, at the same volume as Jack.

"The royal gardens," he said. "She has a tracker, but I'm not sure how to get her out."

"The \_gardens\_, Frost?" Merida asked. "Are ya \_tryin'\_ t' get her caught?"

"Where else was I supposed to hide a girl with twenty feet of blond hair?" Jack asked.

She didn't have an answer to that, except to cross her arms again.

"How do we get her onto the ship?"

The three exchanged glances.

Hiccup was the first to narrow his eyes in thought. "If you can get her to Lake Camo, to the east of the palace, we can fly over and pick you up."

They came to a stop on the corner of the sidewalk.

"It'll have to be fast," Jack said. "If they see you at the lake, they'll realize something's up."

"Ya got a better plan?" Merida challenged.

Jack stared at the red head for a moment, wondering for the hundredth time what was wrong with her.

They were quiet for another moment, considering. Then Jack nodded.

Without a word he turned back toward the gardens at a jog.

"Ya better be safe, Frost," Merida called.

Jack just shook his head, wondering what in the universe could be causing her mood swings.

#

Jack checked the screen on the inside of his gauntlet, where the small blue blip on the screen told him where Rapunzel was. Another light showed him his own position.

Not that it was helping much.

It should have been a simple matter of following a straight line to where she was.

But Jack was stuck on the paths that wound their ways, serpentine, through the expansive gardens. He could have cut straight through the plants. But Gothel seemed to have a thing for thorny plants, and the area he needed to get through was a hedge of vicious blackberry bushes.

Jack rubbed the long scratch on his side, the skin red and raised along a thin line of blood, where a thorn had cut through his shirt when he tried to push through the hedge.

The paths guided him this way and that. And at the moment, he was moving away from the princess's position.

There had to be a where to wherever Rapunzel was â€" she had gotten there, after all. The question was how long it would take him to get there.

"Are ya sure you're lookin' for her, Frost?" Merida snapped through the comm in his ear.

The red head really needed to learn patience.

"I know where she is," he said. "I just have to get there."

"And you're takin' too long."

Jack shut off the link.

The sun was starting to go down. The lights in garden grew brighter with each passing moment, even as the shadows grew stronger just beyond the reach of the artificial lights. Soon the part would be starting. And some of the guests would, inevitably, make their way to the gardens.

Why hadn't he thought to give her his spare commlink? He wondered.

Right. He had been too busy being sentimental over an ascension cable.

Finally the path he was on curved in the direction of wherever the princess was hiding.

A moment or two later the brambles gave way. Jack stepped off the path, walking a straight line through the pear trees. His eyes dated between where he was stepping and the screen on his gauntlet. She hadn't moved the entire time he'd been searching â€" he hoped that was a good sign.

The sunlight was all but gone when he glanced down at the screen and saw the two blips were right in front of each other.

Looking up, Jack found himself face to face with a pear tree.

Stepping closer, he looked up among the thick leaves that coated the branches. The tree probably wouldn't be able to handle his weight. But light as the princess was, it was probably just strong enough for her.

With all the leaves, it was hard to see anything among the branches.

"You up there, Blondie?"

A shadow shifted, just enough for him to know it wasn't the work of the wind. "Jack?"

"Yeah."



She let out an audible sigh, and a murmur that sounded like a prayer of gratitude. Jack grinned slightly as she clambered down toward him. On the last branch, he reached up and took a hold of her waist to lower her down to the ground.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Fine." She smoothed the front of her dress. Her hair, he saw, had been braided back out of the way so it no longer dragged on the ground.

"Did anyone come out here?"

She shook her head. "No."

Jack turned his commlink back on. He was almost surprised Merida wasn't ranting into the link.

"You there, Red?"

"'Bout time, Frost! Do ye have her?"

"Yeah," he said. "We're headed to the lake now."

"We're on our way," Hiccup said. "We'll meet you there."

Jack turned back to Rapunzel, who watched him nervously. Her hands were trying to worry a lock of her hair. But the motion was impossible with her hair pulled back the way it was.

"Come on," he said. "my friends will meet us at the lake and we'll get off world. Can you run?"

#

She managed to keep up with him on the run to the lake, though he wasn't running at full speed. But by the time she got tired, Jack felt it was safe to slow down.

They reached the lake shore out of breath, but there was no sign of the Night Fury yet.

"Thank you," she said, after a moment.

Jack's eyes were on the sky, searching for the ship, but noticing something else. Among the stars red, blue and yellow lights shown down with constancy. Spacecraft "and nowhere near Pallash I, which hung low in the sky to their left. More activity than there should have been for a planet where so little happened.

"Don't think me yet," he murmured, glaring at the ship lights. "Not until we're off world."

The familiar purr of the Night Fury engines reached his ears, growing steadily louder. From his belt he withdrew a glow wand. A tap at the power button activated the device, flooding them in blue light as he saw the sleek black ship fly over the hill.

"I see you guys," he said into the comm.

He reached back and took the princess's hand to keep her close. With his other hand he held up the flow wand.

"Same," Hiccup said, a moment later.

The Night Fury glided down. From the ship's belly he saw light appear as the ramp lowered, Merida at the end, feet braced against the wind that blew her curly red hair this way and that. She held out a gloved hand.

Jack handed Rapunzel up to her, the princess squeaking in surprise as she was thrown up onto the ramp, then nimbly jumped up himself.

As soon as they were onboard, Jack started running toward the cockpit, not sparing a moment for Merida or Rapunzel. A surge of relief swept through his system now he was back in his element " on the ship that was so familiar to him. But he remembered the activity in the sky, and knew he couldn't relax just yet.

"You saw the skies?" Hiccup asked, as he moved to the copilot's seat.

Jack took his seat with a deep breath. His fingers flexed around the yoke.

"Yeah. How many are there?"

He could have checked the readouts from the sensors, but he turned his attention to the engine, making sure it was prepped to break orbit and make the jump to light speed.

"Two carriers directly ahead of us " three more that I can see," Hiccup said. "Each has ten fighters out already."

"Prep the canons," Jack said. "But keep them in stealth mode for now " we're not firing the first shot if we can help it."

"Right." He heard the flips switch as Hiccup prepped the weapons.

Footsteps made him glance back as Merida and Rapunzel entered the cockpit, effectively taking up what little space had been left by Hiccup and himself.

"Don't you guys have somewhere else to be?" he asked, rolling his eyes. "Exchanging beauty tips or something?" His tone came out more biting than he'd intended.

"Watch yer mouth, Frost," Merida snapped.

"Fine," Jack said. "Just get to the gun turret, will you? And don't fire until I say so."

Merida muttered under her breath as she left the cockpit, but Jack didn't bother trying to hear.

"What is her problem lately?" he wondered out loud, when she was out of earshot.

He and Merida had always had a love-hate relationship, almost comparable to siblings in the way they teased each other. But the last few weeks her jabs had turned vicious. Jack was left wondering what he had done wrong " and he couldn't think of anything.

"Your guess is as good as mine," Hiccup sighed. "Want me in the turrets too?"

Jack nodded. Hopefully it wouldn't be necessary. But it would give him more breathing room in the cockpit.

"What about me?" Rapunzel asked, as Hiccup left.

"Just strap in."

He turned his attention back to the viewport as he guided the ship higher into the atmosphere.

The higher he went, the larger the Imperial Carriers loomed ahead, each surrounded by a swarm of one man fighters.

"Think they know you escaped?" Jack asked sarcastically, flipping a few toggle switches on the dashboard.

Rapunzel didn't reply. Probably for the best.

Jack took a deep breath, just as the comm beeped with an incoming transmission. He couldn't have sent Hiccup away " now he had to be civil. He had thought he was done with that when he left the Academy.

"Don't say anything," he whispered to Rapunzel, then accepted the transmission.

"Unidentified transport, this is Imperial Carrier 2106. Pallash II is currently on a planet wide lockdown. Please return to your docking immediately."

Jack didn't like the sound of that " but he figured a shot couldn't hurt.

"Imperial Carrier, this is the Night Fury. We are aware of the lockdown, but we have clearance code from Air Traffic Control. We are prepared to broadcast it on your signal."

Jack slid the clearance card into the reader and prepped it to send while he waited for a reply.

"Why's it takin' so long?" Merida hissed over the intercom.

"Because they're bullies," Jack muttered.

"Night Fury, situations have changed," the voice said after a moment, making Jack bite down on the inside of his cheek. Hard. "Please return to your dock immediately. You will be notified as soon as the lockdown has been lifted."

Jack glanced over his shoulder. Rapunzel sat in the chair behind him and to his right. Her green doe eyes were fixed on the ships in front of time, wide with fear, while she worried her lower lip between her

teeth.

She was being admirably quiet.

They were still too long.

"\_Night Fury, \_please return to the planet surface immediately," the voice said with formal ferocity.

"Yeah, right," Jack muttered, shutting off the comm. "Everyone hang on!"

The \_Night Fury\_ was the pinnacle of Berk engineering (which was saying something), built for stealth and speed. And Jack was one of the few pilots who truly knew how to take full advantage of that design.

Jack gunned the engine as he jerked the ship down and to the left.

"Merida, bring the cannons on line!"

"Do ye have t' be so \_rough\_?" Merida called, loud enough Jack heard her both through the comm and through the doorway.

"I told you to hang on!" He said. "Hiccup, you too."

"On it!"

Jack continued down until he had passed the carriers. The fighters were still hot on their tail, but the carriers didn't have the maneuverability to follow. Which would make it easier to stay out of their gun range.

Pulling up sharply, he flipped the ship over so they faced the oncoming fighters.

The upper blasters fired â€" Merida's. She was muttering something Jack didn't even try to make out. And her aim was better than usual. Hack's brows rose as she picked off the fighters.

It took a moment for the register they were being fired on. By the time they started returning the fire, Hiccup and Merida had already put a dent in their ranks.

"Do you understand ship readouts?" he asked Rapunzel, not looking back as he pulled sharp upwards.

"Y-yes."

He nodded to the copilot's seat. "Keep an eye on the ship readouts â€" tell me if there's any change."

Rapunzel obeyed immediately, unstrapping herself and moving forward to take the indicated chair.

Jack tried to keep the ship level while she moves. But three fighters dove at them, all aiming at the upper gun turret, where the shields were weaker around the weapons.

Without time to give a warning, Jack swerved left and down, away from the shots.

Rapunzel had braced a hand on the back of the copilot's seat. But the force caused her to stumble and lose her grip. She fell backwards, half-land in Jack's lap, her face pressed against his chest.

"I'm so sorry!" she cried, scrambling off him into the seat.

Jack's eyes were fixed on the port. He shook his head, too focused to be flustered by the momentary closeness.

"How are the shields?" he asked when he heard her restraint harness click into place.

Before she answered, another group of fighters came toward them.

Jack growled in his throat. "Hold on!"

He threw the ship into a downward spiral.

"I'm gonna kill ya, Frost!"

"Hiccup, you have got to figure out what her problem is!" Jack snapped, without thinking.

"I've been trying!" Hiccup said. "There's a carrier coming around underneath us."

"Shields are at full strength," Rapunzel said.

Jack nodded his thanks. "Can you set the engines to make the jump?"

"Where to?"

"Co-"

The ship shuddered as an energy blast hit the shields.

"What was that?"

"Carrier," Hiccup said. "To our left. Sorry I didn't see it."

"Shields are at seventy percent," Rapunzel said.

Jack exhaled and looked through the viewport.

"Blondie â€" prep the jump for Corona."

"All right." Her slender fingers danced over the screen, setting the nav computer for the jump.

Jack swing to the right.

"Merida, on my signal, I need you to blast us a way out of here. Hiccup â€" you're our cover. Got it?"

"Got it," the couple chorused over the intercom.

"Tell me as soon as the jump is set."

"Almost," she muttered.

Jack twisted to the left again, this time spiraling upward.

When he was above the carriers, he turned the ship's nose toward open space.

"Course locked," Rapunzel said.

"Merida, now!"

The guns blazed as Merida picked off the ships directly in front of them. Hiccup handled the fighters that came in to attack.

When the path clear, Jack flipped the switch to initiate the hyperdrive.

For a split second, everything froze in place. Then the stars elongated, the ship lurched forward, and Pallas was left behind.

#### 4. Chapter 4

**\*\*Okay, first off. This is my submission from Day 3 of Jackunzel Week (the story that started it all, if you will), but I did a lot of editing to both flesh it out and help it fit into the story. So, even if you read the original version, please reread it now.\*\***

**\*\*Also, my friend recently suggested a ship name for Jackunzel â€" Frozen Lanterns. Anyone interested in making it stick?\*\***

**\*\*Oh, yes. Random note. \*\*\_\*\*The Hopeful Puffin\*\*\_\*\* is the name of Hiccup's first boat in the \*\*\_\*\*How To Train Your Dragon\*\*\_\*\* books. After I posted the first version of this story during Jackunzel Week, I realized I should have called the ship \*\*\_\*\*The Hopeful Puffin II\*\*\_\*\*, to play with the idea that Hiccup had still gone through some kind of pirate training program on Berk. Since book 10 already included \*\*\_\*\*The Hopeful Puffin II\*\*\_\*\*, I decided to use \*\*\_\*\*The Hopeful Puffin III\*\*\_\*\* for this story. Yeah, kinda random. Sorry.**  
**\*\***

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 4\_

"All right," Jack sighed, closing the menu on the ship's computer. "All our records are changed. The ship is now \_The Hopeful Puffin III\_, and we haven't been anywhere near Pallas or Corona."

He spun the pilot's chair to look at his friends. Hiccup sat in one of the other seats, while Merida leaned against the wall in what looked suspiciously like a sulk.

In the past few days she had gone from screaming death threats to only speaking when absolutely necessary â€" though jibes were still

present.

"We have a shot, then," Hiccup sighed, leaning back in his seat.

"Maybe," Jack shrugged. "But seriously, Hiccup. \_The Hopeful Puffin\_? You promised we would never use that name again."

"It's nonthreatening," Hiccup said. "That's what we need right now."

"I'd've thought ye o' all people would understand that, Frost."

Jack didn't even bother reacting.

"Saving a princess is not supposed to be this complicated," he muttered.

"Saving the princess wasn't complicated," Hiccup said, hands in his hair. "It's what we do now that's complicated."

"Thank you for clearing that up." Jack rolled his eyes.

"Would ya boys quite arguin'?" Merida asked. "Frost, quit complainin'."

The three friends were quiet for a moment, Jack glaring at the dash as though it had done him a personal injustice.

"The simple fact is: we saved the princess, but we can't take her back to Corona. Now with the Imperial occupation." Hiccup said. "We have to lay low. Preferably on a planet we're familiar with, that's not in Imperial territory."

"That's getting' harder every day," Merida said, though they were all aware of the fact.

"What about DunBroch?" Hiccup asked, looking at his wife. "Your father's no friend of the Empire."

But Merida shook her head. "Not while the war with Mor'du is back on. What about Berk? Even if they thought t' look â€" which they probably wouldn't â€" there's plenty o' places to hide."

"Yeah, no," Jack said. "You want to take a princess from Corona to a planet of space pirates?"

Merida glared at him.

"There's nowhere else without going through Imperial Territory," Hiccup said.

"There's Warren." There was a decided smirk in Merida's voice.

Her wit had returned apparently, and she was now using it to sharpen her verbal jabs.

Jack turned his chair again, to find his friends looking at him expectantly.

"You're kidding."

Their expressions didn't change.

"You remember I was kicked off the planet, right? With 'good riddance' still ringing in my ears?"

"Wouldn't Aster make an exception?" Hiccup asked. "For the princess?"

For a moment, Jack pictured Rapunzel on Warren, among the bright flowers, the warm sunlight and the green grass... she would fit in just fine. And Aster would probably love her.

He probably would make an exception...

If Jack apologized. But he wasn't ready to admit just how wrong he had been. Not to Aster. Anyone else maybe "€" but not him.

The ship shuddered, lurched, and then stilled. The vibration of the engines changed as it switched from the hyperdrive to the sub-light engines.

"Where are we?" Merida asked.

"Krash," Jack said, as he spun his chair back to the viewport.

Krash was a small trading post, always in the shadow of its sister planet. Its clientele ranged from honest traders to space pirates, and everything in between.

Since they were on the run, it seemed like a decent place to regroup. Few questions were asked, and they would only be here a few hours.

But when he looked out the viewport, he saw it wouldn't be that easy. An Imperial Carrier, large and menacing, orbited the planet, like a vulture waiting for anything to move. While fighters hovered like flies.

"What are they doin' here?" Merida asked.

No one bothered to answer that, because they all knew.

"Have they hailed us?" asked Hiccup.

Jack was about to say no when the comm system crackled.

"Unidentified vessel, this is Imperial Carrier 74-8512. Please state your cargo and purpose on Krash."

"Of course "€" it's an enhanced carrier," Jack muttered, noting that dash in the identification number. That meant not only were there more fighters, troops and officials, but the commanding officer was higher ranking. And the weaponry was to the max.

Hiccup took the comm.

"Imperial Carrier, this is Captain Haddock of \_The Hopeful Puffin



III\_."

Jack cringed at the fake name, as he always did.

"We have no cargo. We're here to refuel and resupply."

The friends waited with baited breath, Jack's brain already racing over the best possible course of action for whatever happened next.

"How many are on board?"

"Ruder than usual," Merida muttered.

Hiccup looked at Jack, silently asking if they could hide or disguise the princess.

Jack held up three fingers, and Hiccup nodded.

"Three, sir. My first mate, our pilot, and myself."

Another pregnant pause that extended far too long. Jack watched the numbers on the dash chrono change twice.

Jack half turned to Merida, not taking his eyes off the carrier.

"Get the princess. Hide anything in her room."

"What about her?"

"Evidence first. Iâ€"

He was cut off when the comm system crackled again.

"\_Hopeful Puffin\_, prepare to be boarded and searched."

Merida ran out of the cockpit.

"I hope you have an idea," Hiccup said, after a polite agreement to the officer.

#

Rapunzel wore one of Merida's dark green flight suits (which didn't fit her slight frame), with her pink brocade slippers, when Hiccup and Jack joined them in the ship's lounge. It looked as though she had been in the process of re-braiding her hair, but most of it still trailed on the floor behind her.

"You hid everything?" Jack asked, looking at Merida even as he reached for Rapunzel's hand. He was doing his best not to think about how easy the motion had become in the past week.

"Down the laundry chute," Merida said with a nod.

"We're latched onto the carrier," Hiccup said. "They'll be on any moment. What's your plan, Jack?"

"Let them search the ship," Jack said.

Rapunzel's hand gripped his, and he could feel her nervousness. He returned her grip in an attempt to reassure her.

"Where'll ye be?" Merida asked.

"I'll be in the shower," Jack smirked. "Come on, Blondie."

Merida called after them, but they were already around the corner, so Jack couldn't make it out.

It must have been a sign of trust that Rapunzel didn't question him, just followed.

They came to a stop outside his room, and Jack slammed his hand against the palm reader outside his door. His agitation grew in the split second it took for the light to flash green.

The Imperials wouldn't waste time boarding the ship. Even if they weren't suspicious, they were probably bored.

The door slid open.

His quarters were simple â€" a square room with a shower unit and a refresher unit in one corner, along with a walk in closet. He hadn't bothered to personalize it much. What was personal to him was safely tucked away in the closet, or the drawers of the bureau against one wall.

He removed his gauntlet and tucked it into one of his drawers.

"Get in," he said, nodding toward the shower unit.

Rapunzel nodded and went to bed. Jack followed, tugging off his blue shirt and his brown slacks. Unlike his gauntlet, he just threw them to the floor with no regard for where they landed.

In the doorway of the shower, Rapunzel's green eyes widened.

"Jack-!"

She stopped with a gasp when Jack pushed her gently into the shower, still in his boxers as he followed her in.

He paused to make sure a towel hung on the bar outside the shower unit. Satisfied everything was in place, he went to close the door... but rolled his eyes when he saw several yards of golden hair still outside.

"Is all this hair really necessary?" he asked again, as he dragged it in. He hadn't had to worry about her hair while they were on the ship (she had kept it braided most of the time), but couldn't resist asking again.

All her hair was in the shower unit, and he closed the door.

"Long hair is a mark of nobility on Corona." She was pointedly looking everywhere but at him.

"That explains it." He rolled his eyes. But he had seen weirder, and more annoying, marks of hierarchy.

He picked her up by her waist and set her on the ledge that was meant for shower products. She was small enough it worked as a seat, and he handed her the bottles that had been there before her.

"Are you sure this will work?" Rapunzel asked, not looking up from the bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and body wash, that now sat on her lap while Jack twisted the knobs to start a stream of hot water from the shower head.

"Nothing is sure," Jack said, the familiar words leaving his lips before he registered they had even shown up in his mind. He didn't remember who had said them, only that he had heard them so many times the response was second nature.

He took a deep breath to calm his own nerves, trying to think of anything he might be missing, or overlooking.

The shower unit filled with steam, decreasing the oxygen level.

With another deep breath of the thick air, Jack leaned back against the wall of the shower, keeping an eye on the waterproof comm unit for an alert from Hiccup or Merida.

"I'm sorry to be so much trouble," Rapunzel said, after a moment.

Jack shrugged, not sure what to say.

They hadn't exactly planned to rescue her... they had been in a place at a time. Right or wrong, he wasn't sure. But the princess wasn't guilty of anything; she didn't deserve to be locked up. And Jack was too much of a free spirit to wish that on anyone who wasn't a criminal.

"Will it take long?" she asked. "For them to search the ship?"

"Depends how bored they are and how suspicious," he said. "A carrier that big has enough troops to send several teams-

There was the thud of boots on the ceiling overhead, on the upper level. He heard Rapunzel gasp, but held his breath and counted the steps just about his head.

"Six," he said. "They never board a ship this size with less than eight, so there's at least two teams of six searching all three levels."

"How do you know?"

Jack looked over at the princess, who was going from nervous to terrified at a rapid rate. Not that he could blame her. Empress Gothel wasn't known for humane treatment in her prisons.

He hesitated a moment, then sighed.

"I attended the Imperial Flight Academy," he said. The decision was

what had gotten him kicked off warren.

"You were an Imperial?"

"Technically," he said. "I was one of the best pilots they ever had."

She arched an eyebrow at his bragging, and he was relieved to see she was relaxing a little.

"Hey, it's true," he said. "But there were problems when they tried to make me an officer."

"What happened?"

"According to my final assessment, I was 'rash, not a team player, had no sense of responsibility and lacked proper respect for authority'."

Rapunzel giggled. She finally looked up, albeit shyly, to meet his gaze.

"Merida fell over laughing when I told her that." He rolled his eyes. "Can you hand me the shampoo?"

Rapunzel looked at the three bottled in her lap, and handed over the requested one.

Jack squirted some of the blue substance in his palm and began to lather it through his hair.

"What about you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

Jack shrugged. "Tell me something about yourself. What do you like to do?"

"Oh. I- I like to paint. And read. And garden." She leaned back against the shower wall. "If I were on Corona, I would be helping replant some of the garden beds right now."

She hugged herself, her eyes darkening. "All I ever wanted was to be a good ruler for my people. Now I don't know if I'll ever be able to go back. And with the trade blockade, they're probably suffering now."

Jack looked away, not sure what to say or do to comfort her.

But the sound of sniffing made him look back.

Rapunzel quickly wiped away her tears, but he could still see her stress, and her fear.

"Hey." Forgetting his hands were covered in shampoo suds, he reached out to rest a hand on her arm.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know being scared won't help anything. But this is all my fault. I'm so sorry, Jack. If I hadn't-"

The comm buzzed.

"Frost? Where are ya?" Merida's irritation thickened her accent.

While dragging Rapunzel into the shower would have been a risky move under normal circumstances, Jack realized that with the state Merida was in, she was likely to follow through on all her recent death threats.

He hesitated a moment, refusing to admit he was scared of the redhead, before he hit the talk-back button. "I'm in the shower. Can this wait?"

"No," she snapped. "We're bein' searched."

"My door's unlocked."

Her annoyance, he realized, could be used to his advantage, he realized, adding a few more details to his plan. He let himself smirk for a moment, but then turned back to Rapunzel.

"We're gonna get through this, okay?" he said, touching her cheek gently. It was how Toothiana had comforted him when he was younger, and the motion wasn't fully thought it.

"Are you sure?" she asked, looking up to meet his eyes. She seemed to have forgotten his state of dress for the moment.

Nothing is sure. The words resounded in his mind. But he pushed them aside.

"You gotta trust me," he said, speaking fast and low. "Just try to keep quiet, okay?"

"Okay," she nodded.

Stepping from the shower, Jack wrapped the towel around his waist, over his boxers. Just as he folded it into place, the door of his room slid open. After the warmth of the shower, the air that blasted in from the hall was frigid against his wet skin.

Merida walked in, glaring vibroblades at him, followed by an imperial officer in severe black uniform, and four troopers in full armor.

"Uh, hi?" he offered. Memories of having his dorm room searched as a cadet came back as he saw the troopers.

The officer, whose name tag read Black, looked at him with visible distaste. His angled face was an unhealthy grayish, while his black hair was slicked back to military standards. His hands were held behind his back. When he turned slightly to examine the room, Jack spotted a datapad in one of his hands.

The man reminded Jack exactly why he hadn't liked being in the Academy. The stiff formality, and regulated everything, had been mind-numbing.

"Your name?" Officer Black asked, with a disapproving glance over

Jack's appearance.

"Jack Frost." Out of old habit, he almost added 'sir'. But he bit it back in time. His body had started to stiffen to attention, but he refused. He was not a soldier. Not anymore.

"You're the pilot of this ship?" Black's eyes wondered the room, brows raised, upper lip curled.

The troopers were searching his room â€" in drawers, and under the bed. One opened the top drawer and pulled out his gauntlet... but set it down after a moment's examination.

Jack resisted any comment on the invasion of privacy. One had what he recognized as a heat detector. He had anticipated that â€" hence why he'd made sure to fill the shower with steam.

"Yes." Another 'sir' jumped to his lips, only to be bitten back.

"You're the pilot, yet you're taking a shower-" he cast a distasteful glance at the clothes Jack had thrown to the floor "- while this ship prepares to land?"

"It's my time off," he said, with a nonchalant shrug. "Hiccup and Merida are both capable pilots."

More than capable. But he wouldn't say that now â€" not when he was trying to annoy Black out of his room.

Black looked at Merida.

"My husband and I aren't too strict," Merida said, almost biting out the words.

"Hmm."

Black paced around the room again. He visibly cringed when his foot brushed against Jack's abandoned shirt. His data pad beeped, and he looked down at the screen.

He had looked Jack up in the system.

"Where are you from, Frost?"

"Burgess." Originally. He barely remembered it. But he had put it on his Academy application, and that was the information he would go with.

"You trained at the Imperial Flight Academy, I see."

"For two years," Jack said. "They decided I wasn't officer material."

"Clearly." He cast a pointed look at Jack's towel, and still soapy hair. "What's your purpose here on Krash?"

"Refuel. Resupply."

"You're next destination?"

"I'm the pilot, not the captain." It wasn't a lie, since he didn't have a clue where they would go next. "Now, can I get back to the shower?"

Black glared at him.

"Or do you need to search the shower?"

#

\_The Night Fury\_ â€" or \_The Hopeful Puffin III\_, if you will â€" had moved into its sleep cycle. All the lights were dim. Since they were docked on Krash, the engines were silent. Only the faint buzz of the lights, and the hum of the heating system. Kresh was a world of constant night, and the cold seeped everywhere.

Jack sat in the cockpit, looking out at the dull walls of the docking bay. He hadn't bothered to turn on the heater when he had come from his own room, so the cold had seeped into his skin, just as it had seeped into the ship. Not enough to make him shiver, but enough that even he felt cold.

A few thoughts made their way across his mind, but they didn't linger for long. They would pass, to be replaced by another thought.

Nothing deep. Like the fairies on Warren flying past in blurs of color. You knew what they were from familiarity... but you couldn't actually see them.

A new thought came. But this time it lingered as he stared at a patch of rust on the wet durasteel wall without seeing it.

As soon as the Imperials were gone he had gotten out of the shower once more. He had opened the door for Rapunzel (they both needed to change out of their wet clothes).

Merida had been in his doorway, still livid. She had started to lecture... but had been cut off when Rapunzel had assured her it was all right. It had worked, and she said that was all that mattered to her.

The princess was growing on him. But she couldn't look him in the eye without blushing.

Footsteps in the hall made him look back. Hiccup came into the cockpit, running a hand through his messy red-brown hair.

"Why are you awake?" he asked with a yawn.

Jack spun his chair in a full circle. He caught the edge of the dash to stop his momentum, swinging back the other way a little.

"Can't sleep." He continued to swing the chair back and forth. "Merida kick you out?"

Hiccup shook his head as he collapsed into the copilot seat. "She's fast asleep. I haven't seen her so relaxed in weeks. I didn't want to risk waking her up."

That made sense. "You're sure you have no idea what her problem is?"

"No." Hiccup sighed. "Maybe it's the stress. These past few months have been..." He expelled the air from his lungs.

He didn't have to finish the sentence.

"You and the princess seem to be getting close, though," Hiccup said, a smirk appearing through his exhaustion.

"Shut up," Jack rolled his eyes.

"I dunno..." Hiccup said. "If I didn't know better, I'd think the happily single Jack Frost might actually care."

"It's not like that," Jack said, though even as he said it the slight clench in his stomach told him he wasn't being completely honest. "She's just... There aren't many lights left in this galaxy. When you find one, you have to protect it."

So why was his own mind telling him that maybe Hiccup was right...

Jack shook his head slightly to try and clear his thoughts.

But this thought perched on his shoulder and refused to flutter off. Comparable to the fairies again, because there had been the one that refused to leave.

Great. Not only was he (possibly) falling in love with the princess. But he suspected the feeling growing inside him was homesickness. Why else did he keep thinking about fairies and workshops, flower fields, and climbing the Sunset Mountains.

His fingers flexed â€" a habit he thought he had rid himself of long ago. But it was coming back.

He watched his left hand as he flexed the digits to his palm, watching the way the fingers flexed, each a little different in the way it moved.

The tip of his pinky finger hit his palm first, then the ring finger. The middle and forefinger didn't start to move until the other two had touched down. His thumb didn't move.

He repeated the motion, a little slower this time.

He didn't expect a response â€" there was a reason he had given up on the movement.

But he repeated the movement one more time.

A shiver passed down his spine, and it wasn't because of the cold.

"We have to go," he whispered, the feeling bearing down on his mind until it was almost painful.



He didn't bother glancing at Hiccup as he brought \_The Night Fury\_'s engines online. He had to wait a few moments for the engine to warm up. He flexed his fingers as he waited.

Dread nagged at the back of his mind, screaming at him that there was no time, and they had to get out \_now\_.

Small relief comforted him when the familiar vibration of the ship returned.

He saw the Imperial carrier, still in orbit. His stomach clenched as he waited for a hail, even as he prepped the ship for light speed.

But it didn't come.

Jack pulled up the nav computer, easily entering the coordinates from memory. It pulled up an image of a blue, green and while planet, with hints of brown and pink.

"Where are we headed?" Hiccup asked cautiously.

"Warren," Jack said. "I'll just have to admit I was wrong."

## 5. Chapter 5

**\*\*All right guys, chapter 5! This story keeps getting longer...\*\***

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 5\_

"Jack?"

Jack's eyes snapped open and he looked around the cockpit. He hadn't realized he was close to falling asleep until he was woken up by the address. Outside the viewport was the tunnel of colorful, molten light that meant they were still in hyperspace.

Gathering his thoughts, he spun the pilots chair to look at the entrance to the cockpit. Rapunzel stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the dim lights in the hallways.

"Hey, Blondie." He yawned and rubbed his eyes. He had thought he had just drifted off. But the grit in his eyelashes told him that wasn't the case.

"Sorry," she said. Her melodious voice was not helping him wake up. Her voice was low, to match the dim lights of the ship's sleep cycle, and it sounded like a lullaby. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

Jack shook his head. "It's cool."

He yawned again as he turned to check the chrono.

"Are you okay?" Rapunzel asked.

Jack nodded, and gestured for her to take a seat in the co-pilot's

seat beside him. The seat that was becoming hers every time she came into the cockpit.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Fine," she said, taking the offered seat. Her hair was out of its braids and clips, snaking its way out of sight down the hall.

"'Fine' usually isn't up at the three in the morning," Jack said. He was serious, but couldn't stop the teasing note in his voice.

He expected her to smile, but instead she hugged herself.

"Hiccup and Merida are fighting," she said, just loud enough for him to hear over the hum of the engines. "I can hear them through the walls."

Jack quirked an eyebrow " he couldn't help it. "Hiccup is capable of talking that loud?"

They hadn't gone all out and sound-proofed the ship, but the walls between their quarters were designed to block sounds.

Rapunzel's lips twitched ever so slightly. "No, I can't hear Hiccup, but I can hear Merida. It seemed kind of private so I..."

"Came looking for me?" Jack teased.

Another small smile, even if it was only fleeting. "I can't help but feeling it's my fault. I'm causing you so much trouble."

"It's not your fault," Jack said, hoping to ease the worry lines appearing between her eyebrows. "Merida... we've been under a lot of stress, lately. I don't know what's going in with Merida, but it's not you."

He wanted to ask what they were fighting about. They squabbled fairly often, but those usually passed quickly. Jack had never heard them scream at each other " not even Merida. Hiccup was a peace maker. And they loved each other too much to stay mad for long.

Of course, Merida wasn't usually this hard to get along with.

"Are you sure?"

Jack gave her a tired grin. "I promise."

Rapunzel returned his smile, and he saw her relax a little.

"So, can I ask where we're headed?" she asked.

Jack looked over at her. "Hiccup didn't tell you guys?"

He had been holed up in the cockpit for the past few days. Mostly avoiding Merida (who still wanted to lecture him about the shower incident), and working through his own emotions at going back, trying to work out what to say to Aster and the others.

"No." She shook her head. "Merida asked, but he didn't really

answer."

"He's giving me a chance to be a coward," Jack snickered. But then he sighed. "I couldn't ask for a better friend."

"We're going to my homeworld â€" Warren. I was unofficially banished when I entered the academy. But I'm hoping Aster will make an exception for you."

"Oh." She became thoughtful. "Didn't you say you were from Burgess?"

She had been listening to Pitch's inquisition. Impressive.

"It's... complicate," Jack sighed. "I'll spare you."

Rapunzel leaned toward him, elbows on her knees, clearly waiting for the story.

Jack rolled his eyes. But couldn't resist a grin when he looked at her again.

"They found me on Warren when I was thirteen," he said. Bracing one bare foot on the edge of the dash, he turned his chair enough so he was mostly facing her. "I remember I was born on Burgess, but I don't know how to warren. And there are bits and pieces I remember before that."

"I was taken in and raised between the four govoners â€" Nicholas St. North, from the Pole, Toothiana of Punjam Hy Loo, Sanderson of Dune, and E. Aster Bunnymund of Warren. Why the whole planet was named after his territory, I have no idea."

"If Tar Lunar knows anything more about my past, he's not talking. All he told me was my name."

"Jack, I'm so sorry," Rapunzel said. She reached out and rested a small hand on his forearm.

Jack shrugged, but was careful not to dislodge her hand. "Why? The four years I was there were amazing. I had everything I could have wanted. I can't believe I was stupid enough to leave."

"How long until we get there?"

The ship shuddered.

The molten tunnel of light faded to star line. With a lurch of the ship, those lines returned to pinpricks of light in the black sky.

Warren hung directly ahead of them in the viewport, blue and green with a wispy cloud layer. The poles, north and south, were white with snow.

Jack's left hand tingled, similar to falling asleep and he flexed his fingers to try and alleviate the sensation.

"It's gorgeous!" Rapunzel exclaimed, sitting forward to get a better look.

Jack smirked. "You haven't seen anything yet."

And he wanted to show her.

Jack took the yoke and guided the ship closer to the planet's surface.

They descended through the clouds, and Jack heard the princess gasp as the planet's colors were thrown into focus. Green separated into countless shades, meadows and gardens exploding with flowers of every color.

He had only a moment before air traffic control would hail them â€" something he wasn't looking forward to. But first, he wanted to show her his home. And he knew the part she would love most.

"Rapunzel, over there."

She turned and followed his finger to the left, to the Sunset Mountains.

Refracted light turned the sky a hazy blend of blue, pink and gold. The mountains were stained orange, pink, purple and gold.

Tucked among the two highest peaks was what appeared to be a star. What it was, in reality, was the sunlight reflecting off the windows of Toothiana's palace.

"It's beautiful," Rapunzel whispered.

Jack grinned in satisfaction.

But then the moment ended in the simultaneous sounds of footsteps and the beeping of the comm.

"Unidentified vessel, this is Warren air traffic control," a familiar voice said over the comm. "Please state your purpose on Warren."

Jack took a deep breath, bracing himself.

Rapunzel's hand returned to his arm, and he glanced over to see her give him an encouraging smile.

He turned back to the comm.

"Hey, Nightlight," he sighed. "It's me."

There was a beat. Then another. Timed by the sounding of his heart.

"Jack?"

"Yeah," Jack sighed. "It's been a while."

"That's for sure," Nightlight murmured across the line.

"Is that you, Frost?"

Jack cringed at the familiar accent through the comm.

"Yeah, Aster."

Behind him, Merida snickered. He didn't have to look back to know she was enjoying his discomfort.

Another beat.

"Land at the palace docking bay," Aster said, his voice emotionless. "We'll meet you there."

Jack was going to ask who "we" contained, but he could guess. All he said was: "Yes sir."

"Did Jack Frost just say 'sir'?" Merida asked. "The universe it about t' collapse on itself."

#

Jack ran a hand through his hair, trying to calm his nerves.

It had been four years since he had left. And until now, he hadn't realized how much he wanted to come back. He hadn't even realized he still considered this place home. Now he did realize it, and he was faced with the prospect of being kicked right back into the stars.

"Are you all right?" Rapunzel asked, coming toward him. She had changed back into her purple and pink dress.

He was waiting by the boarding ramp.

"I'm fine," he said, scuffing the ground with the toe of his boot.

"Hopefully they don't kick us off planet," Hiccup muttered, as he and Merida approached where Jack and Rapunzel stood by the boarding ramp. His fight with Merida had visibly affected him, his voice and gaze dark.

Jack noticed a screaming distance between the two.

"Are we ready?" Hiccup asked.

Jack punched the button to lower the ramp.

The cool breeze found its way into the ship immediately, even before the light did so. It whispered to itself as it examined the newcomers, ever curious. Jack felt it play with his white hair, and just caught a bubbly laugh of recognition.

He flexed his left hand, and the breeze happily danced through his fingers.

As the ramp continued to lower, he caught sight of the welcome party.

Aster stood at the front, leather gauntleted arms crossed over his chest. The blue furred Pooka was as intimidating as ever.

Merida snorted. "A rabbit? All these years, ye've been runnin' from a \_rabbit\_?"

"A pooka," Jack corrected, not bothering to be offended. He knew Aster too well "and it wasn't his fault if Merida judged on appearances.

Behind Aster was North, tall and imposing. The small, silent Sandy. And the colorful Toothiana.

Before he could start down the ramp, a small blur of color flew toward him with the rapid flutter of gossamer wings. It collided with his neck, and he felt the small fairy nuzzle him, small arms giving as much of a hug as he could.

His companions were staring at him.

Jack just grinned, and reached up to carefully stroke the small fairy.

"Hey, Baby Tooth," he greeted quietly.

She left his neck and flew up to hover in front of him, chirping excitedly. He couldn't understand what it meant "only that she was welcoming him home.

"I missed you too," he chuckled.

He looked up at the sound of a second set of wings, this one louder. Toothiana, her jewel tone feathers shimmering in the warm sunlight, had followed her fairy.

"She tried to go after you," Toothiana said.

"If I could have taken her, I would have," Jack said.

Baby Tooth smiled and took her preferred perch on his right shoulder. She settled in, and he knew she wouldn't be leaving any time soon.

Toothiana smiled and hugged him.

Jack's heart skipped a beat as something unfamiliar spread through his chest. It took him a moment to lift his arms and return the hug, careful of her wings.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd been hugged, and he realized he had missed the assurance that came with the gesture.

"It's good to see you, Tooth," he admitted.

North's deep, belly laugh reached the across the landing pad.

"Is good to see you again, Jack," the man called, as Jack disengaged from Tooth's hug.

Her wings continued to hum with their rapid movement, hovering beside him as he continued down the ramp, Rapunzel on his other side.

He found himself in front of Aster, and had to take a deep breath to

try and push down his fear of being kicked off world. As he took in the brilliant colors of Aster's territory, the familiar weight of Baby Tooth on his shoulder, and the wind whispering in his ear, he didn't want to leave.

The Pooka's long ears twitched, arms still crossed as he looked down at Jack.

He felt a soft touch on his arm, and looked over at Rapunzel. He hoped his expression would tell her he was grateful for the comfort in her touch.

Jack sighed, and rubbed the back of his head. He really wasn't good at apologizing. But if there was another way to keep her safe, he couldn't think of it.

"Look, Bunnymund, I know you told me not to come back. And I was stupid for leaving." He took a deep breath, bracing against the words he had to say next. "I'm sorry I didn't listen."

He looked at North, Tooth and Sandy, who were all watching him with expressions he couldn't read.

"I didn't listen to any of you â€" and you were right." He sighed. "Of course."

"Jack," Tooth murmured, touching his shoulder gently.

"Never thought I'd see the day when Jack Frost admitted 'e was wrong," Bunnymund said. He clapped a paw on Jack's shoulder. "Welcome home, Kid."

Jack's breath caught in his throat, and he barely registered North's laugh. He didn't snap out of his stunned daze until the large man pulled him into a bone crushing hug that lifted him off his feet.

"What brings ya back?" Aster asked when Jack was on his feet and had regained breath and balance.

"Oh, yeah." He turned back to his friends. "This is Hiccup Horrendous Haddock, captain of The Night Fury." He gestured to the ship behind them. "His wife, Merida. And this is Princess Rapunzel of Corona. We accidentally rescued her from Gothel â€" now we need to lay low.

"Guys, this is E. Aster Bunnymund, Nicholas St. North, Sanderson, and Toothiana."

"You have come to right place," North said. He greeted Hiccup and Merida like old friends, then gave Rapunzel a bow with grace that would have surprised anyone who didn't know him and what he was capable of.

"Your Highness, we heard of Corona's struggles," he said, with polite formality. "We are glad to see you safe."

"Thank you, Nicholas," Rapunzel said.

"Please â€" North!"

"North," she corrected, with a smile.

Jack grinned. He knew they would love her.

Aster bowed slightly. "Welcome, Princess. We'll do all in our power to keep you safe. You're all welcome to stay â€" as long as you want."

#

Bunnymund's palace was as bright, colorful and grand as Jack remembered. The gardens were in full bloom, an explosion of colors and floral perfumes that saturated the sweet air. It was familiar, and more comforting than Jack had expected.

He took a deep breath of the bright air as he followed Toothiana down the hallway of the guest wing. The wind whispered to him about the snow in North's territory, and all the fun they could have, welcoming him home, inviting him to play.

Baby Tooth flew at his side, occasionally nuzzling his cheek or neck.

Toothiana was talking to Hiccup â€" something about architecture, or something else Jack didn't understand.

Beside her, one of North's yetis carried the bags Hiccup and Merida had backed. Jack carried his own backpack, and Rapunzel had nothing to bring. Toothiana had already promised to bring the princess fresh clothes. And, secretly, Jack would be glad when she wasn't wearing flight suits borrowed from Merida. They just didn't suit her.

The hallway, like most in the palace, doubled as a balcony. On one side were the doors that led to the guest rooms, while the other side was only a railing and support columns that offered a panoramic view over the gardens. In the distance the sunlight shimmered off the sea that formed the edge of Aster's territory. Jack could just make out the shadowy silhouette of Sandy's island, far out on the water.

Toothiana stopped in front of an open door, and gestured with a smile. "Hiccup, Merida, this will be your room. Rapunzel, yours is the next one down."

Rapunzel's eyes widened and she looked over to where Jack leaned against one of the columns that supported the ceiling above the walkway.

"What about you?" she asked.

Jack looked at Toothiana, curious about that as well.

"Jack has his own room in the main living quarters," Toothiana explained.

He saw fear seep into the princess's expression, and she took a step closer to him.

"Don't worry, Punz." He reached out to touch her arm. "I won't be



far."

"I-I know," she said, an obvious attempt to sound confident. "I'm sorry."

"it's okay," he assured. He pushed away from the column, and took a step closer to rest a hand on her arm. With his free hand he gestured up and to the left, in the general direction of his room. "If you need me, I'm upstairs, the door with frost painted on it â€" you can't miss it."

He did not miss Toothiana's quirked eyebrow. Or at least, the quirk of the teal feathers that started at her brow. But he ignored the expression.

Cautiously he took another step closer.

"You're safe here, I promise," he whispered. "These people practically raised me, remember? I trust them with my life."

She sniffed, the first sign she was fighting back tears.

"I promise," he repeated.

"Okay," she nodded.

#

"It's just the way you left it," Toothiana said, as Jack pushed open the door of his room. "All your rooms are. Though Baby Tooth took it upon herself to take care of your room in Punjam Hy Loo, so I can't guarantee what state it's in. We all hoped you would come back."

Jack could only nod in response as he looked around his room. He had a room at each of the palaces, since he had spent time with all of them. But most of his time had been spent in Warren, so this was his main room.

The walls were painted light blue, the blankets on his bed a darker shade of the same color. All the furniture was light stained wood, carved by North and himself.

He ran a finger upwards over the light pad (one of the few modern contraptions in the palace), bringing the overhead glowpads to their full strength.

Baby Tooth chirped happily and flew over to the small alcove in the corner (her room), where a purple pillow with gold fringe was set up for her bed.

Jack and Toothiana both laughed as the small fairy settled into her nest.

"She missed you," Toothiana said. "I don't think she'll let you out of her sight again."

Jack chuckled. He bent down to tug off his boots, exhaling in relief as his bare feet met the white carpet.

He swallowed as he approached the bed, and reached out to take the staff that rested against the wall, just where he had left it. He ran his hands over the gnarled wood, following the curve of the crook at the end.

Baby Tooth left her perch and flew over to the staff. She examined the care wood carefully, then looked up at Jack in confusion.

"I'm not myself yet," he whispered, with a smile at the fairy.

"Dinner's not for a few more hours," Toothiana said, laying a hand on his shoulder as though to comfort him. "There's time for you to go to the pond."

"Maybe later," Jack said, setting the staff back against the wall. "I don't want to go too far until the princess is comfortable."

Toothiana giggled, and Jack fought the urge to smack his forehead. He hadn't realized how that sounded until the words were out of his mouth.

"You like her," the fairy said.

"I'm overly protective," Jack said, and gestured to Baby Tooth. "With a habit of taking in strays, remember?"

"Oh, I remember," she laughed. "That snow fox you found still lives in North's workshop. And the bird still lives at my palace."

Jack rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. Maybe it was because he was a stray himself, but he could never turn away from anything that needed help. That might be why he felt such a strong instinct to take care of the princess — emotionally as well as physically.

"But I don't think the princess is another fairy, or snow fox," Toothiana said, her tone equal parts serious and teasing. That must be where he had learned it.

"Tooth..."

"It's not a bad thing," she assured. "I know you always said you probably wouldn't fall in love, but you're not the type to stay single. You care too much."

"I'm gonna go swimming," Jack said, picking up his backpack.

He wasn't sure he could have this conversation.

#

Jack broke through the surface of the cool water, taking a deep breath to refill his depleted lungs.

The wind asked him why he was swimming in the garden pool, when the pond in the woods wasn't that far. It could tell he was incomplete, and didn't understand why he chose to stay that way longer than he had to.

He took another deep breath and dove back under the water.

He didn't bother trying to explain to the wind that the pond was not a place for swimming " it was a place for replenishment. And he could put that off.

What he wanted right now was just to enjoy the water.

To enjoy being home.

As the oxygen in his lungs began to run out, he broke through the surface again. He swam closer to the shallow end, where he could stand with the water a few inches below his chest.

He pushed wet hair from his face, and the water from his eyes.

The wind seemed to have given up on him for now. He could hear it whispering to itself, laughing like a child as it rolled and tumbled. But it wasn't asking him questions, or asking him to play. It had never had a very long attention span.

Baby Tooth was still close by, splashing in the shallows.

A sound among the bushes caught his attention. He glanced over, expecting to see the gardeners, or one of the children and animals that treated the garden as a playground.

Instead, through the hanging wisteria flowers, he caught a familiar head of golden hair. She was currently looking away from him, but that was easily remedied.

Reaching up, Jack flicked a finger.

No response.

He sighed.

Taking a deep breath, he focused. At the moment, he didn't have control over the wind " only the ability to encourage it a little. And that would take effort.

He moved his forefinger in a small circle, finding the current of the wind. It slowly wound around his finger. He had the breeze's attention.

Maybe he should go to the pond sooner than later.

He moved his finger again, and the wind lazily followed his suggestion.

It picked up around Rapunzel, staying the blossoms and tugging at the skirt of her dress.

She giggled and turned with the breeze. Her gaze landed on him, and he waved to her.

"Hey."

She smiled shy " and he didn't miss the way her eyes darted to his bare chest before fixing on his face with more focus than

necessary.

She passed through the bushes that surrounded the pool, coming closer to the edge of the water.

"What are you up to?" Jack asked.

"Just exploring," she said. Her eyes looked around at the flowers, and a nearby trellis of swirling wrought iron. "It's so beautiful here."

Jack chuckled. "Yeah, I think you mentioned that."

Rapunzel giggled, lifting her shoulders in what appeared to embarrassment.

She had changed into a light green sundress â€" he recognized the color as Toothiana's choice no doubt, it was her favorite shade. But it was better than Merida's flight suits.

"I'm glad you like it here," he said. "I know it's not your home..."

"Thank you, Jack," she said, smiling.

He shrugged, and tried to pretend his cheeks weren't warming. He really wasn't good at small talk. If she wanted him to tell her his past, he could do that (he already had). Small talk, not so much.

He skimmed his hands over the surface of the water, trying to think of... something to say.

Baby Tooth had stopped her splashing, and now hovered above the water, her bi-colored eyes darting between Jack and Rapunzel. He was very aware she would probably repeat every detail to Tooth and all the other fairies. But he decided he didn't care too much.

He looked back at Rapunzel.

"You wanna come in?" he asked, gesturing to the water around him.

Her eyes widened, a flush painting her cheeks. "N-no, no. I'm fine."

Jack nodded awkwardly.

Silence fell over them, and Jack wished he could dive under the water again to avoid the discomfort that came with it.

"Uh... this might sound really strange," she said suddenly. "But I think my hair is getting longer."

Jack quirked an eyebrow, eyeing the hair that just looked endless to him, even with it wrapped, twisted and braided the way it was. "How can you tell?"

She giggled. "Like I said, I know it sounds crazy. But I was re-braiding it earlier and it just feels... long. Longer than I'm used to," she added, as though anticipating Jack's comeback that her

hair \_was\_ long.

Jack chuckled, but the information nagged at the back of his mind. Most people were unaffected when they came to Warren. Even most of the children that lived there were, for lack of a better word, 'normal'. But some...

His left hand flexed, and the breeze drifted around his arm. Not like it would if he were in full control " but it remembered him, and was curious enough to pay attention to his motions.

But he brushed off the feeling. Twenty feet was a \_lot\_ of hair, he reminded himself. And just because she thought it was longer than when they'd arrived didn't mean much. They were all tired.

And he was jumping to conclusions.

Rapunzel sat down in the grass at the edge of the pool, smoothing her skirt over her folded legs, oblivious to what was going through Jack's mind.

"I didn't expect everyone to be so nice," she said.

Jack ducked down in the water so it came up to his chin, needing something to do to clear his head of the thoughts he was having.

"Toothiana brought me so many clothes, I don't think I'll be able to wear them all."

Jack chuckled and stood up a little so he could speak without getting water in his mouth. "Yeah. She tends to go overboard a lot."

Rapunzel was quiet for a moment, playing with her fingers, not looking up.

Jack splashed his face, more because he needed something to do so he wasn't standing there like an idiot.

"She's very pretty."

"Colorful is the word I tend to use," he chuckled.

"You two seem... close."

Jack stopped with his fingers halfway through his head and turned back to face her.

She still wasn't looking up from her own fingers.

Narrowing his eyes, Jack stepped closer to where she sat.

Was she...?

Was that even possible?

The water was down to his hips, and she still refused to look at him. A wild flower blooming next to her amidst the grass held her rapt attention.

Jack couldn't resist. He splashed some of the water in her direction.

Only a few drops made it far enough to land on her, but her eyes widened as she gasped, and finally looking at him.

"Are you... jealous?" he asked, eyes still narrowed in fascination as he watched her cheeks darken.

"N-n-no, I-Iâ€"

She wasn't fooling him.

But rather than torment her, he splashed her again. (Alright, so he was still tormenting her â€" but that was a nuance.)

"Are you sure you don't want to come in?" He gestured to the water again. "After everything you've been through lately, you could probably use some fun."

She blinked, as though confused that he wasn't going to push her to admitting her jealousy.

After a moment she smiled and stood up, wading into the clear waters of the pool.

\*\*I was going to keep going... but I realized that it was going to get really long so I decided to end it there. \*\*

\*\*Until next time... And for those of you following me on tumblr (songofafreeheart, just like I am here) â€" the swimming scene will be next chapter. \*\*

## 6. Chapter 6

\*\*Merida is getting kind of hard to write... This chapter I'll finally tell you guys the reason (for those of you have haven't guessed â€" and most of you have), but I'll also explain why her mood swings have been so severe. And I've just about given up on her accent, if you can't tell...\*\*

\*\*Meanwhile, we finally got official pictures of HTTYD 2 Hiccup, and Astrid. I cannot tell you how much I love the new designs. That's actually about how Hiccup would look in this story, though maybe not so confident. He's not riding a dragon in this story, after all.  
'(\*\*

\_Among the Stars\_

\_Chapter 6\_

Jack turned to stare at the princess, who grinned without shame as the water she had splashed at him dripped down his back and shoulders, to reunite with the water in the pool.

"I did not expect that," he admitted.

"You splashed me," she reminded, crossing her arms, chin raised with

mock authority. "It's only fair."

Well, she was a princess, so technically she did have authority. But for the moment, that was beside the point.

Jack wiped away the water running down his temple, still staring at her.

Her grin was not fading.

Finally, instinct came in to play, and he responded in the only way that made sense.

Her splashed her. Not the few drops he had gotten on her while trying to coax her into the pool. This one was a declaration of war.

He laughed as her eyes widened in shock.

"You!" But she was laughing as she splashed him in return.

Jack's grin widened. It had been too long since he had just had fun, and he was starting to feel like himself again.

He stepped closer as he splashed her again. If he had a connection with water the way he did with the wind, he was sure he would have heard it laughing with them.

Each step he took forward, Rapunzel took one back to avoid him and his plashing. She was small, but she was strong. Most of her attempts to send the water in his direction fell short across the distance she kept between him. But a few of her blows landed solidly on his chest and stomach.

His blows, on the other hand, landed every time.

They continued moving in messy circles.

Jack could have lunged forward to close the distance " but that would put an end to the game. And he was having too much fun.

He skimmed his hand over the surface of the pool, sending the water in her direction. Splash fights were something he had done almost to a science, as with most games. If you went too deep into the water in an attempt to make a bigger splash, you would get next to nothing. The secret was to push the water on the surface.

Her crystal clear giggle as the water rained over her plucked at a cord in his heart. He couldn't begin to describe the feeling it gave him " he could only say that he liked it. And that he'd never felt it before he had pulled her through the air vent of her cell.

Without realizing it, too caught up in their game, they had edged closer to the slant in the floor of the pool, where it dropped dramatically from three feet of water to eight.

Rapunzel went to take another step, but fell backwards when there was nothing to catch her foot. She let out a cry of surprise, and Jack lunged forward to grab her wrist and pulled her to him.

He took a step back into the shadows, where she could easily stand on her own.

Still he looped an arm around her waist, without thinking, while she regained control of her breathing.

"That's the third time I've saved you, Blondie," he smirked.

He refused to admit his own over-reaction to the situation. He knew there was nothing dangerous in the pool. And it only took a moment to guess what had happened. But rather than admit to the fear that had clenched his heart for a split second, he decided to have a little fun instead.

"Aren't there supposed to be rewards for rescuing princesses?"

"You didn't \_save\_ me," she said, with a small laugh. "I lost my balance."

"Hey, the water can be a dangerous element," he said, inserting mock indignation into his tone.

It was easier than examining what had just happened inside his own mind.

"I can swim, Jack! I'm not completely helpless."

Be still his beating heart " was that a smirk she was wearing?

"I would have been fine."

"Uh-huh."

He vaguely registered that her back was pressed against his chest, his arm still around her waist " and for the light of him he couldn't remember how they had gotten in that position. Was her skin making his look so pale? Or was he so pale he made her look tan? Strange thoughts, perhaps. But he was truly curious as he looked at his arm next to hers. The difference in their skin tone was almost startling. He was used to being pale, but his skin looked almost white in comparison to hers.

"Is that why you're here, Jack?" she asked quietly, snapping him out of his thoughts about their contrasting skin tones. "For a reward?"

The fear in her voice made his skin crawl.

He wrapped his free arm around her shoulders " again, without thinking " and hugged her to his chest.

"Of course not."

His mouth was right by her ear, so he only had to whisper.

No reward could have made him admit he was wrong. Especially not to Aster.

He felt Rapunzel relax back against his chest. Another tug on his heartstring, and he didn't know why. Just as Toothiana had said: she



wasn't another fox or fairy. And this was more than he'd ever felt for any of the strays he had taken in.

"I don't have anything to give you for a reward," she said quietly. "I wish I did. You've been so..."

She trailed off, and Jack hugged her tighter, trying to still her trembling.

"I wish I wasn't so scared," she said, ducking her head. "You, and Hiccup, and Merida, you've done so much for me" and I don't know how I can repay you. And I want to believe you when it tell me it will be okay, Jack. But I'm still so scared. Even here."

"It's okay to be afraid, Rapunzel."

"You're not afraid."

Jack took a deep breath and buried his face in the crook of her neck. He didn't want to admit to her that he was terrified. And he didn't even know" only that it had something to do with her. But saying that wouldn't help abate her fear right now.

"We all get scared sometimes."

She wriggled in his hold, and reluctantly he started to let do.

Before his arms could reach his sides, Rapunzel turned and wrapped her arms around his waist, face pressed against his bare chest. Her warm breath sent a shiver up his spine as it hit his skin.

He wrapped his arms around her again.

It was a relief when he felt her relax.

Would it be possible to just hold her until her fears faded away?

Probably not. Reality didn't change unless you did something to change it.

"And you don't have to be jealous," he said, stroking her hair.

Her arms tightened around his waist in surprise at the return of that subject. She opened her mouth to say something. But before she could figure out what that was:

"Rapunzel?"

"Merida," Jack muttered, trying not to grimace.

He once more lowered his arms, but not before Merida came around the hedge that bordered the pool. Her turquoise eyes landed on them with a forced Jack could feel. And he became hyper aware that he wasn't wearing a shirt. Though it had barely registered a few moments before.

Rapunzel pulled back and turned to Merida, with all the dignity of being a royal born. "Yes?"

"Toothiana offered t' help us get ready for dinner." She glared at Jack as she spoke. "I've been lookin' all over for ye."

Jack waded out of the pool, Rapunzel a few steps behind him.

From the nearby gazebo, he withdrew several of the towels that were stored in a wooden cabinet. He gave one to Rapunzel, and her smile tugged at his heart again.

He nodded and threw one of the towels over his head, drying his hair to escape Merida's glare.

"I need t' talk t' ya, Frost."

Jack slowly lowered the towel, and met Merida's gaze. Why did he feel like a young child caught deliberately breaking the rules? He hadn't done anything wrong.

He glanced at the princess, who had already reached the opening in the hedge, but had stopped to look back at them.

"I'll see you at dinner," he said, trying to alleviate the concern in her green eyes as they darted between Merida and himself.

"Okay." She clearly didn't believe him, even as she left the pool and headed back toward the palace. But not without a last glance back at them over her shoulder.

He waited until the sound of her footsteps faded before he looked back at Merida.

She was still glaring, arms crossed over her chest.

"You better be careful, Merida," he said, trying to alleviate his own tension. "If you keep glaring, your face will freeze that way."

"I thought ye were smarter than that, Frost."

Jack wrapped a towel around his waist, over his swim trunks.

"Smarter than what?" He was annoyed that was so quick to lecture, but his question was genuine.

"That!" she waved her hand at the pool. "Whatever you're playin' at!"

Jack had started to turn away, to pick up the shirt he had left on one of the marble benches beside the pool. But her words turned him around before he realized his braid had sent his muscles the command.

"Playing?" he asked, somewhere between surprised and furious at what she was accusing him of.

"Well that looked awfully cozy for someone who told me he never planned on marrying."

Jack groaned and rolled his eyes. Why was everyone reminding him of

that today?

"I made that decision when I was seventeen," he said. "I'd never met anyone I was interested in."

"That justifies it?"

"Justifies what?" he asked, his voice rising in frustration. "And what about you? Or are you forgetting how you and Hiccup met in the first place?"

"That was different!" Her voice rose to meet his volume.

"You stowed away on The Night Fury so you wouldn't have to get married!" He couldn't help it. A laugh escaped him as he turned back once more to retrieve his shirt. "I didn't even get the irony of that until now."

"Shut it, Frost."

Jack just shrugged. "Are we done here, then?"

He turned to leave, shirt in hand, but she grabbed his shoulder and turned him back to face her before he could make a getaway.

Maybe he should have gone to the pond.

"This ain't about me 'n' Hiccup," she snapped. "We're tyin' t' keep the princess safe. An' that doesn't include you playin' her heart. I thought ye were better than that."

"I'm not playing anything," he said. "She's scared â€" I comforted her. I've been doing that since she got on the ship. I didn't realize that was a sin."

"It ain't," Merida said. "But it don't explain why you're half naked â€" again."

"We were swimming," he said. "I was swimming, she came over and I invited her in. Nothing happened!"

"That doesn't explain why ye were holdin' her," Merida challenged.

Jack glared at her for a moment... then shook his head. "This is ridiculous. Nothing happened, and nothing would have happened! Yes, maybe I'm interested in her â€" but that doesn't mean I'm going to take advantage of her just because she trusts me!"

"She's a princess, Jack."

"Yeah, I noticed." He didn't see what that had to do with the situation.

"And you're a pilot."

That pulled him to a stop. And he lost the last hold he had on his own temper. She had been pushing him for weeks, and he was done.

"I notice that didn't stop you, Princess." He spat the title with

more venom than intended, and bit back the words he was tempted to say next. He chose the second thought that came to him. "Or is it different because Hiccup was the hope and heir of the Hooligan tribe? Emphasis on was, because he ran away after he lost a civil war that he almost single handedly started! Leaving his father in slavery, and the tribe in the hands of his cousin Snotlout, who is nothing more than the pawn of the worst tyrants of Berk's history â€" which is saying something! Did I leave anything out?"

"Jack."

Jack had opened his mouth to say something else, before Merida could get a word in, but his jaw snapped shut at the address and he looked up to see Toothiana fluttering down from over the hedge.

Baby Tooth had been flying at Toothiana's shoulder, but she returned to Jack's in a moment.

The small fairy nuzzled his neck in what he recognized as an apology, and he didn't have to ask what for. She had gone to get her queen when his conversation with Merida had become tense. Baby Tooth knew the fairy queen was one of the few people who could make him back down from a fight (though he didn't need much persuasion at the moment).

"It's okay, Baby Tooth," he murmured. He reached up to stroke her head with the tip of his finger.

Toothiana looked between him and Merida. And though she didn't glare, the disapproval in her cerise eyes was like lead in Jack's stomach.

"Sorry," he said, averting his gaze before she said a word.

"Jack, why don't you go take a shower and get ready for dinner?" she suggested, her tone gentle.

"Yes, Mother." He tried to chuckle at the old joke â€" but his voice was too dark to be teasing.

#

"Do I want to know why my wife is livid this time?"

"Nope."

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything," Jack snapped. "Rapunzel and I were swimming. She was scared. I gave her a hug. Merida saw and assumed I was taking advantage of her!"

He leaned back against the headboard of his bed. He pulled the hood of his sweatshirt low over his eyes while he glowered at a bare spot on the light blue wall of his bedroom. He was aware that he was sulking, and didn't much care at the moment.

He had showered after he had gotten back from swimming. His formal clothes were laid out at the edge of his bed for later, but for now he was comfortable in an old pair of jeans and his hoodie.

He had hoped to sulk alone, though.

"Why was she scared?" Hiccup asked.

"I'm not even going to answer that," Jack muttered, closing his eyes.

"Right," Hiccup sighed. "Right."

"Then Merida reminded me that Rapunzel is a princess and I am a humble pilot."

He heard Hiccup walk toward the bed, then the familiar sound of wood tapping against the wall. Opening his eyes, he saw Hiccup had picked up the hooked staff, hefting the wood in his hand to test the weight and balance.

For a moment he considered demanding it back, but decided it was worth it and just closed his eyes.

"Did you tell her the truth?"

His eyes opened, just slightly, and he looked over at his friend.

Hiccup met his gaze steadily, in a way that told Jack he hadn't misinterpreted the question.

"How did you know?"

"North and I were talking about the repairs that still need to be made to \_The Night Fury\_, " he said. "It came up."

"Yeah â€" it just came up that I'm a Governor?" He once more considered taking back his staff.

"You're lucky, Jack," Hiccup said. "I know North isn't your father. But I would give anything for my dad to be as proud of me as North is of you. He kept telling me stories about how you would save baby snow foxes, or how you and Nightlight wreaked havoc on the entire planet trying to prove which of you was the better pilot."

Jack looked down at his hands. The fingers on his left hand flexed. And the wind looked over at him... and meandered through his fingers because it had nothing better to do.

He would be grateful when it would listen to him again. But it was too late to go to the pond tonight.

Hiccup squinted, holding up the staff so he was looking down the length. "How does this thing work?"

"It only works for me," Jack chuckled, finally taking it from Hiccup.

#

Jack had last been in the banquet hall on the summer solstice, a few months before he left. And as he walked in, it was just as grand as

he remembered. Especially considering the staff had only been given a few hours' notice to get everything prepared for the banquet.

Rows of paper lanterns were strung overhead, bathing the tables in soft light.

Most of the floor was set up for the children to eat on the floor, with blankets and pillows set out to make them more comfortable. They would spend the meal divided between eating and playing with each other, while the adults sat at the tables to one end of the room.

A part of Jack wished he was sitting on the floor. But Rapunzel was at the main table, in the place of honor next to Bunnymund. Jack was a few seats down and across from her, in his seat assigned as the Governor of Winter, between North and Nightlight (he wondered if it was chance or if someone set up their seating because they all had the same white hair). Hiccup and Merida sat across from him.

He glanced toward the head of the table, where Bunnymund and Rapunzel were in an animated discussion about gardening and painting. He was glad to see she was smiling, with no sign of her earlier fear. And they were getting along as well as he had predicted.

Hiccup and North were talking about ship designs, and improvements that could be made to The Night Fury. Jack was surprised that he wasn't too curious about what they wanted to do to the ship he had regarded as his for the past several years. But he couldn't bring himself to pay attention to the conversation, though a few weeks ago he would have been all over it.

Merida was poking at her salad with her fork, but Jack had yet to see her take a bite. He watched as she took an apple from a fruit pyramid that doubled as a table centerpiece. She looked at the fruits for a moment as though considering it... then set it back.

Jack frowned. Since when did Merida say no to apples? His annoyance was starting to give way to concern.

"Where's your staff?" Nightlight asked, in his quiet, steady voice. His staff, with the crystal blade that held his moonbeam companion, leaned against his chair. Jack sometimes wondered which gave off the stronger light: the staff or its weilder.

"I haven't been to the pond yet," Jack said. He took a drink of water. "There's no point carrying it around until I have."

"When you returned, remember that you still owe me a spar," Nightlight said, with a feint smirk.

Jack returned the expression. "Tomorrow. You're on."

Nightlight nodded again, then turned to Katherine, who sat on his other side.

The salad course ended, and North's yetis (who were accomplished chefs) came in with the soup course. As they approached the table, grunting at the elves that were forever standing where you wanted to put your feet, Jack took a deep breath and caught the strong scent of the hazelnut soup.

His eyes fell on Merida just in time to see her face pale, her eyes widen, and jaw clench. She was up so fast she knocked her chair over in her hurry to get to the door, kicking aside a few of the elves that didn't get out of her way fast enough. (No one would hold that against her.)

Hiccup and Jack were seconds behind her.

Merida was on the ground in the garden just beyond the banquet hall. Jack cringed as the dim light let him see her body shudder, then he heard the distinct sound of her throwing up into one of the bushes.

"Merida!" Hiccup was close to panic as he knelt beside his wife, holding back her untamable hair.

"I'm fine," she muttered. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, but she was still pale. "I'm fine, Hiccup."

Jack's brow furrowed as he leaned against a column of the walkway. "Fine usually doesn't include throwing up in garden shrubs."

"Shut it, Frost."

"He's right, Mer," Hiccup said.

It had been a while since Jack had heard those words. He would have felt smug if his friend wasn't throwing up in bushes.

"\_Now\_ you're worried about ma health," she muttered.

Jack's mind was racing. Now that he had enough of the pieces, they were falling into place.

The mood swings should have been a dead giveaway, now he thought about it. But he hadn't noticed until she had turned down an apple (something she never did), and she had reacted to the smell of the soup. It was the only trigger that made sense.

"Merida..." he frowned, wondering if he could possibly be right. "Are you pregnant?"

"What?" Hiccup's eyes widened, darting between Jack and Merida.

The red head's expression was a clear answer, even before she nodded slightly.

Jack grinned at Hiccup's dazed expression. But his friend was an analyst, and it only took a couple moments before his gaze snapped back into focus.

"How long have you known?"

"A few weeks," she said. Jack had never heard her voice so broken. "I'm at about six weeks."

Well, that explained the mood swings that had left them so confused.

"Hiccup."

Jack's eyes snapped back to the couple when Merida's voice told him she was close to tears.

"I want this babe," she said, her accent thick with emotion.

"Of course," Hiccup said. "That's not even a question."

But Merida shook his head.

"We can't raise a child like this," she said. "Runnin' from planet t' planet. I'm not raisin' my child like that."

Jack stepped back, realizing this was a private moment.

He headed back to the banquet hall, running a hand through his hair.

"Is she okay?" Rapunzel stood in the doorway.

"Uh, yeah." He thought about explaining... but it wasn't his announcement to make. "They need to talk, though."

#

Jack sat on the floor this time, back leaning against his bed. He couldn't resist a smirk as he looked at Hiccup, who lay on the floor.

It really wasn't a humorous situation. But watching Hiccup try to figure it out was comical. To Jack, at least. And most things were amusing to him in some way.

"I wasn't expecting to be a father so soon," Hiccup muttered, running his hands over his face.

Jack wasn't going to mention that he was not surprised... but found he couldn't bite it back.

"Hiccup, the only way to avoid having kids is to not have sex," he said. "That really should be included in marriage vows." He took a drink from the bottle of juice he'd been rolling between his hands. "I thought it was common sense, but apparently not."

Hiccup's face turned red. "This from a guy who hides the princess in the shower."

"There is a different between hiding in a shower and being intimate," Jack said. He took another drink, not wanting to admit that his topic was making his throat dry. "Besides, it worked. And I didn't see you coming up with any better ideas."

Hiccup nodded, still staring up at the ceiling.

"You guys talked about kids, right?" Jack asked.

Hiccup nodded. "And it's not that I don't want it. We just didn't plan for it. Not now."

"We're not exactly in the habit of planning," Jack muttered, thinking



back to Pallash II, and the rescue plan had had come up with on the fly. It was how they normally operated.

"What now?" he asked.

Hiccup groaned.

"You can't raise a kid on a star ship," Jack said. "I'm pretty sure that's child abuse."

"I know," Hiccup sighed. "This is what I've been talking to Merida about for the past two hours. She refuses to go back to DunBroch. And she's carrying my child â€" I'm not going to argue too much."

Jack smirked.

"But I'm not raising my child on Berk, either," he said. "Which means I have 7.5 months to find a new home world. And figure out what to do with you."

Jack's had just stood up and picked up his staff. His head jerked around to look at his friend. "Me?"

"I know we don't have a contract or anything," Hiccup said. "But if Merida and I settle down, you're out of a job. No offense, but I'm not giving you \_The Night Fury\_."

Bracing the end of the staff on the floor, Jack leaned against it, one hand in the crook to help keep balance.

"That actually works, since I was thinking I might have to leave \_The Night Fury\_," he said. "Not that I don't enjoy working for you... But I have responsibilities here."

"What about the princess."

Jack's heard clenched as he leaned more weight on his staff.

That was a very good question. One he didn't have the answer to.

#

Jack was sound asleep, more so than he had been in a while. He was dreaming about water, freshly fallen snow and warm sunlight. He was fairly sure Rapunzel was in the dream as well, just out of sight. He wasn't sure if it was a nightmare or not, because he couldn't shake the feeling he was searching for something without finding it.

The dream ended abruptly with the blare of a klaxon.

Jack jolted awake and sat up in bed, looking around.

The door to his room opened, Bunnymund looking in.

"Imperials, Mate," he said. "Get dress â€" come to the control room."

The Pooka's green eyes darted to the staff that once more leaned against the wall. "And bring the stick."

**\*\*Yes, Bunny just called Jack's staff a stick. I couldn't resist.  
XD\*\***

## 7. Chapter 7

**\*\*I have to make a correction. Last chapter, I used the name "Mary Katherine", rather than just Katherine. I was mixing up my William Joyce characters. For those who don't know, Mary Katherine is the main character in **\*\*\_\*\*Epic\*\*\_\*\***, named for Mr. Joyce's late daughter. **\*\*****

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 7\_

The control room was already full when he reached it, dressed simply in jeans and his hoodie, Baby Tooth hovering nearby, his staff propped against his shoulder. He hadn't realized how much he missed that weight.

Everyone glanced up at him as he came in.

"Took ya long enough," Bunnymund muttered.

Jack rolled his eyes while Toothiana lightly chastened the Pooka.

"Eh, he wouldn't be Bunny if he didn't give me a hard time," Jack shrugged, walking over to the screens the others were returning their attention to. In one of them he saw clearly the shape of an Imperial Carrier, several fighters already buzzing around it like flies around a dead carcass.

"How did they get here?" Toothiana asked. Her cerise darted between her companions, worry etched on her face. "We're not even on their star charts. We shouldn't be."

"We're not," Jack said, in an attempt to reassure her. "I've been checking regularly." Though it didn't change the fact there was an Imperial Carrier on their doorstep.

"They how are they here?" Bunnymund asked.

Jack leaned closer to the screen, examining the details. There, on one side, the identification number was written in stark white characters.

"Can you zoom in on the ID?" he asked Nightlight, who sat at the control board.

His friend nodded. He tapped a few of the keys, then touched the screen with both thumbs and forefingers, framing the ID number. His fingers pulled apart, and the image zoomed in with the movement, bringing the number into focus on the screen. It was blurry around the edges, but he could still read it.

Jack's jaw clenched as he put the pieces together.

"That's the carrier that searched us on Krash," he said. "They must have put a tracker on \_The Night Fury\_."

"You didn't do a scan after they searched?" North asked.

Jack cringed. That had been one of the first things North had taught him, and he had forgotten it in his relief at getting the imperials off the ship. "I forgot."

"All right," Bunnymund said. Jack was grateful the other Governors didn't seem interested in lecturing him on his error.

"Tooth, to stay with the princess," Bunnymund said. "Katherine, look after the children North, take your fleet into space â€" take care of the fighters. Frost, you're no good to use the way ya are â€" take a speeder-bike and head to the pond. Nightlight, you'll be on the ground with me."

"Yes sir," Nightlight nodded.

Jack was going to argue that he was as good a fighter as any of the other people without powers, if not better. But he bit it back, acknowledging what Bunnymund was really saying. As he was, he was one more fighter. And they had plenty of those.

He echoed Nightlight's "yes sir" before he turned and followed Toothiana and Katherine out of the control room and toward the living quarters.

"I'll move her to my room," Toothiana said, glancing over at him. "Merida as well. It's on the second floor, so it will be easier to defend."

"Just don't let Merida think you're coddling her," Jack snorted. "Pregnant or not, she doesn't like that."

Toothiana laughed.

They passed the hall that would have taken him to the hanger bay, where the speeder-bikes were parked. He was grateful neither of them commented on it, knowing anyone else would have tried to stop him. There wasn't much time, but he wasn't leaving until he had seen Rapunzel.

When they reached the guest wing the lights were one, Hiccup, Merida and Rapunzel were already in the hallway, with two of North's yetis. As soon as they rounded the corner, Rapunzel ran toward him, throwing her arms around his waist.

"Jack!"

Jack returned the hug, taking a deep breath of the floral perfume in her hair, and the smell of sunshine that was uniquely hers. Part of him wished he would never have to let go.

"I have to go," he whispered against her hair, his arms tightening around her thin frame.

She pulled back and stared up at him.

"I'll be back," he promised, before she could ask any questions "since he didn't know how to explain. "But there's something I have to take care of. We're moving you and Merida to Tooth's room " it's easier to defend."

Withdrawing his arms reluctantly, he took her hand. "Come on. I can't leave until you're safe."

On their way through the main living quarters, he pointed out the door of his room so she would know where it was.

North met them at the door of Toothiana's suite, which was painted with burst of colorful flowers and ribbons " as perfect an introduction to the fairy queen as Jack's door was to him.

"Thought you could use extra guard," he said, gesturing to the three armed yetis behind him. "Jack! Why you still here?"

"I'll leave in a sec."

North nodded, eyeing Jack and Rapunzel's joined hands, and turned to Hiccup.

"Ah, Hiccup! I wondered if you would want to join the fighters. We can always use a good pilot!"

"Are you going up?" Rapunzel asked, after Hiccup's eager acceptance.

But Jack shook his head. "I'm staying planet side."

"But you're leaving the palace?"

"There's something I have to take care of," he said. "Bunny's orders. Then I'll be back."

She bit her lower lip.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, running a hand over her upper arm to sooth her.

"Yes," she said.

Her eyes met his, and the sincerity in her gaze tugged at his heart again.

"But why do you have to go."

He reached up and ran his thumb over her cheek bone. She closed her eyes at the touch, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"I can't explain it now," he said. "I'll show you when I get back. And I will be back."

When she opened her eyes again, the gentle expression made his heart ache. Because the next time he saw her, she might not be so willing to let him touch her. That thought gave him the courage to lean in and kiss her forehead " because it might be the only chance he

got.

"Okay," she whispered.

\_That's my girl,\_ he thought with a smile.

"Jack?"

He looked over at Merida.

"I'm sorry for what I said earlier," she said. "For the past few weeks. I've been..."

"Pregnant?" Jack offered, when she struggled to find the right word.

"Aye," she nodded.

"It's okay," he said. "Stay safe, Merida."

"You too, Frost."

He squeezed Rapunzel's hand one last time, then turned and followed North and Hiccup to the hanger bay.

#

Winter was Jack's territory. North east of Warren, through the forest that straddled the territories. True to its name, it was a place where the snow and ice never melted. The children that lived in Bunnymund's territory would bundle up and head into the woods to get their fill of snowy fun, then return to the warmth of Warren when they were done.

Jack guided the speeder bike through the trees that grew thicker the closer he got to his territory. The trees limited his speed, but he still pushed as fast as he dared as he expertly wove through the trunks. It was easy as long as he kept his eyes focused on what lay ahead of him.

Everything beyond the beam of the bike's headlight was lost in a pool of inky blackness.

Something blindsided him. It came from behind on his right, ramming hard into his side so hard it forced the air from his lungs.

The force threw the bike off course, and it swerved to the right. His fingers pulled the left brake hard, causing the bike to turn at the last moment before it slammed into a tree.

He looked back at where he had been a moment before.

There was nothing â€" only shadows and silver birch trees with their distinct, papery bark.

He killed the engine. The hum died away... leaving a silence that Jack knew wasn't right. This was Winter. This was his territory. No matter how long he had been gone, he knew this place better than he could ever know \_The Night Fury\_ â€" and he knew \_The Night Fury\_ like the back of his hand. The sound of his own heart beat told him

something was out of place.

There was a full moon in the clear sky, and the wind from the east was cold and sweet. The wolves should have been singing, calling to their packs, announcing a successful hunt, establishing their territory.

Owls should be swooping down on small animals, venturing through the underbrush. He should be able to hear said animals scurrying around.

So why could he hear anything?

Even the wind, normally happy to tell him anything and everything "about a fawn born in the woods in Warren, or mermaids playing on the shores of Dune " wasn't talking to him at the moment. It only whispered to itself something Jack couldn't understand.

And if the moon was full, and the sky was clear, why were the woods so dark?

There was a murmur to his left. Not the wind's playful voice. Something darker. Something he didn't want to admit he recognized, because he didn't want to admit it was possible.

Jack looked to his left, his eyes narrowing as he looked into the shadows. The moon's light was steady, and the headlight of the bike was off. The shadows should not be moving.

He turned on the bike's engine again, turning so the beam of light cut through the shadows like a knife. Multiple somethings skittered out of the light, just slow enough that he caught their movement. If he had blinked, he would have missed the movement of the creatures that blended so easily with the shadows.

He shut off the engine again, and the shadows flooded into the path where the light had been a moment before.

He dismounted the bike, taking his staff from where he had strapped it to the back. His other hand was on his blaster. Familiar as the staff was in his hands, it would provide only so much protection at the moment.

Though if the creatures in the shadows were what he suspected, his blaster would be little better.

Something cold brushed against the back of his neck.

Not his kind of cold " not snow and frost. But the cold of being too long in the dark - hopelessness and despair.

A shiver shot down his spine, the fine hairs on his back rising.

Darkness was leaking into his mind, whispering to him. Whispering of his own failures. Of the way he had shirked his responsibilities here on Warren.

His eyes snapped open and he spun on his heel "

Just in time to see a dark, shapeless creature skitter back into the trees.

"Fearlings," he whispered. His hands tightened on his staff.

Why were they in his forest? They should have been trapped in their dark prison, where he and the other Governors had bound them " back when he was fourteen.

Was it because he had left his territory undefended for four years?" he wondered. Had he left the door open for them to gather in his woods?

His jaw clenched at that thought.

The imperials were attacking the palace. His friends were all in that battle. Hiccup was in the atmosphere, with North's fleet. Now was not the time for him to get into a battle with Fearlings. He needed to get back to the palace.

"You know, I'd heard rumors about this place."

Jack's breath caught at the voice. He'd heard it only once before " but he recognized it. In part because he had almost expected it. Not here, in his woods. But when he recognized the carrier, he had known he would encounter the man again.

"I didn't believe them, of course," General Black said.

Jack's eyes darted around, trying to determine the direction the voice was coming from.

"A planet where certain people acquire sets of powers, where all four seasons exist at once. But this place is even more fantastic than I imagined."

Jack suddenly wished he had gone to the pond earlier, rather than putting it off. He had no power over the Fearlings that were circling around him like wolves closing in on their prey.

"Running from the battle, Frost?" Black asked with a smirk in his voice. "I can't say I'm surprised, really."

The muscles in Jack's jaw tightened further.

He glared at the creatures around him, fighting back the shadows creeping on the edge of his mind.

"I went over your reports from the Academy, you know," the man went on. He still hadn't shown himself, but his voice kept moving amidst the shadows. One moment on his right, the next in front of him. Behind him, then to the left.

Jack kept his hand on his blaster, the only weapon he had at the moment. It wouldn't work on the Fearlings, but it probably would work on Black.

"Loyalty never was your strong suite," he went on. "Never concerned about anyone but yourself. How did they ever talk you into rescuing the princess? Were you hoping for a reward?"

"You don't know me," Jack said.

"And yet, here you are," Black sneered. "Running from the battle. Even your so called friend are fighting for a princess and a planet that aren't even theirs to defend."

For a moment, just for a moment, Jack's mental defenses slipped. Not because Black was right. But because the battle was where he wanted to be.

He should be with the other Governors, and Nightlight. Rapunzel's fearful expressions flashed in his mind. He should be with her, to protect her mentally and physically. Even Baby Tooth would be fighting.

And here he stood, in the middle of the woods " because he hadn't done was he was supposed to do.

Again.

He would have to apologize to Tooth for not taking her advice. He could have avoided this whole situation " and his argument with Merida.

He would have kicked himself, had it been possible.

In that moment, when his mental defenses fell, one of the Fearlings could get close enough to brush against him.

He cried out as the creature came in contact with him. In that moment it grabbed onto his fears, and it felt as if it were trying to pull those fears out through his pores. The mental pain was so great it felt physical.

"Do you like my new friends, Jack?" the general sneered. "I felt them calling to me as soon as we came out of hyperspace. They showed me where to find them " and how to free them."

Well, at least it wasn't Jack's fault the Fearling were free. Not because he had left, at least. Not scanning \_The Night Fury\_ for a tracking device still put some of the blame on his shoulders.

"And all this power..." Black laughed. "I really should thank you for leading me here."

Jack reholstered his blaster, and transferred his staff to his right hand.

Flexing his fingers, he called on the breeze that hovered around them, watching with its usual curiosity. He kept his movements subtle, to avoid drawing the general's attention.

"How did you find this place, Frost?" Black asked. "Out of curiosity."

\_Out of curiosity, can you decide on what you want to call me?\_ Jack wondered, with a roll of his eyes. Merida switched between Jack and Frost depending on how annoying she found him at any given moment, but he couldn't figure out why the imperial kept switching.



But he didn't answer the question. He focused instead on the wind that came to him only out of curiosity.

"Help me," he whispered.

It lazily wound its way around his arm, whispering that it didn't like the Fearlings. It didn't like Pitch. But it liked him. It loved him, really. Because it regarded him as its own personal playmate.

It would listen to him. Not because it had to, it reminded him. But because it chose to.

"I have to get to the pond."

The wind tousled his hair.

But Black didn't like being ignored.

On the general's command, another Fearling dove at Jack, pressing against him, pulling at his fears.

Not the surface fears of him failing as a Governor. (Really, he didn't understand why Tsar Lunar had chosen him.) But the longer it assaulted his mind, the deeper it reached into his mind. The deeper it reached, the darker his fears. Most of them it pushed aside, and then it found...

Rapunzel.

If the Fearling could have laughed in glee at the prize it had found, it would have.

Merida's words, that Rapunzel was a princess, and he was only a pilot, came back to him. He had tried not to admit, even to himself, how hard those words had hit.

But now they were twisted and turned back on his, ripping through him. Because he couldn't deny what he felt for her. He couldn't deny he was attracted to her, but it was more than that. He cared, far more than he had expected. Maybe he even loved her.

But he couldn't leave Warren again. And she would have to return to Corona. It was a tragedy waiting to happen — he couldn't see any angle that where their story could be a happy ending. And the Fearling was having a field day playing with that thought as it coiled around his neck.

In the back of his mind, among the shrinking light, he knew he should fight back. But that got harder with each passing moment.

Then the Fearling found something deeper. A reminder that the palace was being attacked in an attempt to capture Rapunzel.

Worse than being separated from her when she had to return to Corona, he couldn't bear to see her captured again. And if he lost her, because his own mistakes had forced him away from the palace in the midst of a battle.

He remembered her eyes in the shower when \_The Night Fury \_had been boarded. Her fear, every time she thought of being captured again.

He had promised her she would be all right. That he would protect her. And here he was â€" still trying to make up for his own mistakes.

Black laughed. "Don't fight the fear, Jack. It's inevitable, after all."

"No." He had promised â€" and he wasn't going to break that promise.

If their story was going to be a tragedy anyway, he might as well fight with every ounce of his being to ensure it was the lesser of two evils. Because he couldn't live with failing her.

Jack grit his teeth.

The muscles in his hand had tightened with the onslaught of his own fear. It took effort, but he managed to flex his fingers, and the wind came to him. Like all the elements of this world, it would defend the innocent if asked. And he needed that defense now.

He raised his staff, took a deep, shuddering breath, and sliced the staff downward through the air.

The Fearling screeched as the wind gathered around Jack, forming a defense between him and the creatures. It was only an inch, and only for a moment. But that moment was enough for Jack to reestablish his mental shields.

That forced the Fearlings back a few more feet.

Black howled in frustration and let out a cry that sounds like "after him!"

But Jack didn't wait.

Turning, he ran through the woods, not bothering to get back to the speeder bike.

His feet pounded the uneven forest floor as he ran, swerving around the trees. Occasionally he would reach out to grab onto one of the trees, hands sliding over the smooth birch bark, using it to help maintain his balance.

Even in Winter, there were still seasons. Now was the warmer season, so the snow was scattered patches, only left where the shade protected it from the sunlight of the day.

Finally, his foot came down with a crunch of snow. His next step was once more on dirt and rocks. But when he looked up, he saw the familiar rise of rock straight ahead of him. It blocked his view of the pond, and it wasn't exactly how he had planned it... but beggars couldn't be choosers.

Behind him, he could both hear and feel the Fearlings as they gained on him. Now that they weren't trying to hide their presence, they had

taken up a terrifying shriek that set his teeth on edge.

He reached the end of the boulders around the edge of the pond... and jumped.

The wind held him for a moment, before he brushed it off and gravity took fast hold of him, dragging him down... down... down...

The frigid water embraced him.

## 8. Chapter 8

**\*\*Okay, so after Jack's quip in the last chapter about Pitch needing to decide what name to use for him, I want to explain why I switch Pitch's name so much. Remember that Jack doesn't know his first name â€" he only saw Pitch's nametag on his uniform back when he searched **\*\*\_\*\*The Night Fury\*\*\_\*\*, so he only knows him as General Black. Trust me, it's a pain to write. As bad as having to call North Nicholas back when I wrote **\*\*\_\*\*For Better or For Worse\*\*\_\*\* â€" but that was a Rainbow Snowcone story, so most of you probably didn't read that one.\*\*******

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 8\_

Pitch Black stood on the edge of a pond deep in Winter. Deathly silence hung over the surrounding woods. Shadows pressed right up to the frosted edges of the water.

It didn't make sense.

Pitch had assumed that Jack Frost was a coward. There was no other explanation for why he was running from the fight. But he hadn't expected him to jump into a freezing pond just to get away from the Fearlings. Especially since, just before the boy had started running, Pitch had felt something surge inside the boy, and it hadn't been the kind of fear or despair that would cause a man to take his own life.

None of it made sense.

He looked back at the surface of the water, where the last ripples from Frost's impact were all but gone.

He wanted to say "good riddance" and returning to finding the princess. Cold as the water was, Frost should be dead. But he hadn't become a general without learning that if there wasn't a body, the person in question probably wasn't dead. And on this topsy-turvy world, he knew there was a possibility Frost had managed to survive.

"Find me the body!" he snapped at the Fearlings stalking around the edge of the water.

Frost decorated the sand and pebbles at the water's edge, the delicate ice reflecting the moon's silver light.

Before the Fearlings could reach the water, they shuddered and raced

back to the shadowed safety of the trees.

"What's your problem, you-"

Pitch's insult was cut off by the long, clear howl of a wolf.

"What-"

It was followed by another, and another, and another, until the Winter Woods rang with the echoes of the wolves that seemed determined for the entire planet to hear whatever declaration they were making. Their song echoed off the mountains the bordered Winter on the east.

Pitch shuddered at the crystal clear song. His yellow eyes darted around the forest, which a moment before had been silent, the animals holed up against the fear that stalked amongst the trees like a lion in the streets.

The wind, which had been coming from the east, changed suddenly, coming from the north with increased speed, seeming to push past Pitch in its eagerness to get to the pond.

The temperature began to plummet.

Pitch turned back to the pond " and watched, wide eyed, as the frost on the shore spread over the water, a thickening layer of ice taking over the surface of the pond.

At the ponds center " in defiance of all logic " the water began to churn.

A figure broke through the surface just before the ice met in the middle, a blur of white and blue carried into the air by the North Wind that raced to embrace him.

#

"Welcome back," the wind whispered as it tousled his hair.

Jack grinned.

The wind's attitude toward him had shifted. No longer just fondly curious. It asked him what he wanted to do, awaiting his command.

He could hear the wolves howling, announcing his return. When this was over, he would have to visit the pack.

For now, though, he had other priorities.

His eyes landed on Pitch, who stood on the edge of the pond, staring up at him. Jack smirked at the man's slack jawed expression.

Gripping his staff, he swept it in Pitch's direction.

A blast of glowing blue ice shot from the crook of the staff, straight toward the Nightmare King.

Black dodged... but barely.

"Butâ€”\_How?\_" the man stammered.

Jack just rolled his eyes.

The man was a problem, to be sure. But for the moment, he wasn't Jack's priority.

"Take me to Warren Palace," he whispered.

A breeze tousled his hair again, while the wind swirled around him, carrying him back toward the palace.

#

The wind held Jack suspended in the air, letting him see the lay out of the palace.

He could see the flash of Nightlight's staff, and his friend's steady glow, in the courtyard. Bunnymund was probably close â€” a guess proved a moment later when Jack saw an explosion of green smoke from one of the Pooka's egg bombs.

To his right, on a cloud of dreamsand, Sandy hovered near the roof of the palace, picking off Imperials with tendrils of the golden sand he controlled. It was the most humane way to knock out a foe, that was for sure. But it was best Jack give him a berth, to avoid being knocked out on accident.

Nightlight glanced up, presumably feeling the drop in temperature Jack had brought with him. When his eyes found Jack, he raised his right hand in a quick salute before returning to the fray.

The courtyard was covered. But the breeze still whispered to him of a disturbance â€” something not as it should be.

Jack headed in the direction of Toothiana's room, keeping an eye on the hall in case any of the troopers had managed to slip past the fighters in the courtyard. If they were following protocol (and his impression of Black was that nothing else would be allowed), that was what they would try to do. Distract the opposition while a few operatives slipped through in search of the objective.

The 'objective' in this case being Rapunzel.

He was almost to Toothiana's room when he heard the sound of a fight â€” especially the sound of impact against the trooper armor. He increased his speed.

Just as he rounded the corner, one of the yeti's hit a black armored trooper upside the head, sending the man sprawling. There were two more troopers on the ground, but three were still standing.

Another yeti was down with a blaster wound.

"Heads up!" Jack shouted as he came around to land behind the yetis. They moved aside just as a bolt of ice shot between them.

It hit one of the troopers solidly in the chest, knocking him down.

One of the troopers (the superstitious type, probably) turned to run, but slipped on the ice that spread across the floor from where Jack stood.

Another jet of ice hit the third, sending him to the ground as well.

One of the yetis spoke what Jack guessed was a thank you â€" he couldn't understand their language no matter how hard he tried.

"Can you take care of them, Phil?"

The yeti nodded.

"Thanks."

He knocked on Toothiana's door before pushing it open.

All three women looked up, Merida and Toothiana clearly ready to go on the offensive, but they relaxed when they recognized him. He saw Toothiana's eyes take in the frost on his staff, and the edges of his hoodie, and she gave a small smile of approval.

"Jack!"

He grinned, momentarily forgetting himself, as Rapunzel ran to hug him again. Her voice was saturated relief. But his grin fell when she pulled back slightly.

"You're freezing!"

"Sorry," he whispered. Cringing when he heard Merida mutter about how cold the room had suddenly become.

He took a deep breath and replaced his control over his powers. He couldn't raise his body temperature, but he could pull in his aura of cold so he didn't freeze everyone in the room.

"Are you all right?" Rapunzel asked.

"Fine," he assured. "I'm fine. This is me, though. It's part of being the Governor of Winter â€" control of my element."

He lowered his arms carefully, prepared to take a step back.

"Ye gotta be kiddin' me," Merida muttered. "You're a \_governor\_?"

Jack glanced over at the red head.

"There are a lot of kids here, but how many of them do you see with their own rooms in the palace?"

"Why don't ya have yer own palace?" Merida challenged.

"I do." Jack rolled his eyes. "But ice palaces aren't good for entertaining company, and wolves aren't very good conversationalists."

"It's good to have you back, Jack," Toothiana said. "Fully

back."

"Tell me about it," Jack chuckled. Though he couldn't keep a dark tone out of his voice, his fingers still lingering on the sleeve of Rapunzel's jacket, waiting for the moment the cold became too much and she stepped out of his reach.

He looked at Baby Tooth, who was examining the frost on his staff. She nodded in satisfaction, then came up to nuzzle his neck, taking her place in his frosted hood.

"She's been keeping me company," Rapunzel chuckled, watching the fairy.

"She's good at that," Jack whispered, glanced at the fairy from the corner of his eye.

She smiled at him, and chirped happily.

He turned back to Rapunzel, ignoring the other two women in the room.

"Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Are you?"

Hack grinned, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I'm fine," he promised, yet again. "Seriously, Punz â€" don't worry about me."

She shivered.

"Sorry," he repeated, taking a step back to give her space from his icy aura.

But the hand in the folds of his hoodie tightened, keeping him from going very far.

"I have to go back out," he said. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I am," she smiled.

He nodded. "I have to talk to Tooth reallyâ€" "

"Jack?"

The unease in her voice, and the hand that tightened further around his hoodie, make him look back at her with concern. "What's wrong?"

"It's..." She bit her lip. "My hair..." she didn't meet his gaze.

"It's growing?" he guessed, remembering what she had said at the pool.

She nodded. "I was brushing it to calm my nerves, and I just... maybe I'm crazy." She chuckled nervously. "But seeing you like this, I'm

wondering if maybe...?"

"You're not crazy," he whispered, brushing a stray lock of hair back behind her ear. He cringed when he saw a swirl of frost spread over the gold strands where he had touched them. But the lace like design disappeared almost as fast as soon as it appeared.

"I have to talk to Tooth, and I'll have her explain it, okay?"

"Okay."

He squeezed her hand gently before he let go and walked over to where Toothiana was talking to Merida â€" distracting the redhead, he guessed. For that he would have to thank her.

Merida saw his expression and excused herself, going over to where Rapunzel still stood.

"You're not just here to check on her," Toothiana whispered.

Jack shook his head. "The general from the carrier is a new Nightmare King â€" he released the Fearling. It's why it took me so long."

Toothiana gasped, hands rising to her mouth. "Oh, Jack. Are you all right?"

He nodded, getting a little tired of that question. "Yeah. I just wanted you to know, because he'll come here looking for her."

"Also, her hair is growing."

"You think..."

He nodded. "I don't have time to explain it to her."

"All right," she said.

Jack grinned faintly. Toothiana had been the one to explain it to him when his powers had first developed. She would do better than he could, and there was no one else he would trust it to. With a nod of thanks, he turned to run out of the room, pausing only to give Baby Tooth to Rapunzel. While he would have appreciated his little sidekick, she would mean more to Rapunzel at that moment.

He jumped off the balcony railing and the wind carried him back to the courtyard.

He landed between Bunnymund and Nightlight.

Bunnymund threw one of his boomerangs toward one of the last few troopers that was still standing.

"Took ya long enough, Frostbite!" he snapped. "The party's almost over."

If only.

"We have a problem," Jack said. "The general released the Fearlings."



They're probably on their way.

"Another Nightmare King?" Nightlight asked.

Jack nodded.

Bunnymund caught his boomerang, muttering under his breath.

"I already told Tooth."

"Frost, next time ya lead an Imperial Carrier here, I'm takin' a match t' that ice block ya call a palace."

"Good luck with that, Cottontail," Jack smirked. The 'ice block' really was just a technicality. He only went there when he wanted to be alone. He could have lived without it, but he was required to have some kind of palace.

Nightlight rolled his eyes.

Then they all felt it, the encroaching darkness that sent shudders down their spines. Their eyes â€" two pairs green, one pair blue â€" darted around in search of the source. And they saw the stars above being blocked out by a cloud of Fearlings that whispered and shuddered their way across the sky.

"I forgot how horrible they are," Nightlight whispered.

Jack nodded, too intent on reconstructing his mental shields to think of a response.

"The kids," Bunnymund said suddenly.

Both young men looked back at the Pooka.

"We hid the kids in the basement," Bunnymund said. "The Imperials wouldn't care, but the Fearlings are gonna go straight for 'em."

Jack and Nightlight exchanged glances.

"You two'll have t' handle the courtyard," the Pooka said. "I have t' get t' the kids!"

"Understood," Nightlight said, and Jack nodded in agreement.

Bunnymund hopped off toward the basement, where Katherine would be watching the children, probably telling them one of her many stories to keep their minds off what was happening beyond their sanctuary.

The two young men exchanged glances before they wordlessly moved to stand back-to-back, adjusting their grips on their staves.

Jack looked up at the Fearlings gathering in the sky.

"Next time you want to spare, Nightlight, just say so," Jack said, attempting his normal attitude. But his tone fell flat.

"Considering you led a Nightmare King to Warren, I could almost think you're trying to get out of the spar you already promised me," Nightlight countered.

Jack spun his staff over his hand, grinning. "TouchÃ©."

But his smirk, and Nightlight's responding laugh, fell as the Fearlings descended on the courtyard like water from a shower head, swirling down and around them.

"I'll... take the ones on the left, you take the one on the right?" Jack suggested, a nervous chuckle slipping past his lips as he once more failed to alleviate the mood.

"Are you sure you can handle that many?" Nightlight asked.

When Jack glanced over, he saw his friend's brow quirked.

Even as the Fearlings pressed closer, they were solidifying each other's mental shields, giving themselves something to think about so the Fearlings wouldn't have a chance to seep into their psyches. That wasn't something Jack wanted to experience again tonight.

"When did you develop an attitude, Nightlight?"

They exchanged a last glance and a smirk, then attacked.

The moonbeam trapped in the crystal blade of Nightlight's staff shone brighter as it cut through the Fearlings.

The frost on Jack's staff glowed as he shot streams of ice at the writing creatures.

Despite their similarities, they were fundamentally different. And that was reflected in their styles, despite nearly identical weapons.

Nightlight's staff cut long, high, graceful arcs.

Jack's staff moved in short, low, sweeps.

Each blow they landed caused the Fearlings they hit to wither away â€" but the creatures still kept coming at them.

"Jack?"

"Kinda busy," he snapped, sending ice at a Fearling that drove toward him. The flow of the ice illuminated the gaunt gloomy face of the creature. Jack shuddered.

"Remember Maneuver 7?"

Jack looked back, absently hitting another Fearling he saw from the corner of his eye. In his mind he went over the maneuver they have come up with during their training. "You remember we never actually tested that, right?"

"The theory is sound." Nightlight grunted as he cut through several more Fearlings. "We're not getting anywhere like this."

He certainly had a point there, Jack noted, as he looked at the seemingly endless sea of writhing black creature.

"Worth a shot," he sighed.

"Your mark," Nightlight said.

\_No pressure,\_ Jack thought dryly. "Now."

Nightlight shot straight up into the air, through the opening the Fearlings had left directly about their heads.

Jack waited another moment, freezing through a few more Fearlings, then followed his friends. Unlike Nightlight, he couldn't fly of his own volition, so his ascent wasn't as smooth.

They climbed higher, until they could look down and see the entire palace, and most of Bunnymund's territory, laid out beneath them. With another glance to keep their timing in line, Jack nodded. His body went rigid, arms pressed to his side " and he dropped.

The wind rushed through his ears, gravity pulled at his stomach with vicious force. He couldn't deny the exhilaration he felt, in spite of the situation. This was probably why he had come up with this aspect of this maneuver...

Pushing past the adrenaline, he reached into his center, letting his aura of cold extend while the power of the frost built up inside of him, threatening to explode out of him. That force was worse than the gravity pulling so cruelly at his stomach.

The North Wind caught him just in time to keep him from slamming into the stone ground,

Before the Fearlings could swarm back on him, Jack lifted his staff over his head and slammed the end down onto the cobblestone.

Gale force winds emitted in a circle from around his staff, frost spreading from beneath his feet. With the wind came a blast of ice and blue light.

Most of the Fearlings were incapacitated by the move.

A moment later, before the Fearlings could recover, Nightlight landed behind him. He imitated Jack's movement, slamming the end of his staff on the ground. From the young man, and the moonbeam in the crystal blade, came a blinding light rippled through the courtyard, so bright Jack raised an arm to cover his eyes " but he could still see the white light behind his closed eyes.

He waited for the light to fade before opening his eyes, blinking several times before the white spots in his vision faded and he could see again in the once more dimly lit courtyard. There were a few shadows, but they were normal. Jack didn't see any Fearlings.

The Winter Governor let out a breath of relief, leaning heavily on his staff. Beside him, Nightlight leaned forward, hands braced on his knees while he panted for breath, looking as exhausted as Jack felt.

"I wasn't expecting it to be so effective," Nightlight murmured.

"Exhausting, too," Jack said. "I'm not doing that again tonight."

"Agreed."

But the thrill of victory faded too soon, and Jack's head jerked up to look around.

"Where's Black?"

## 9. Chapter 9

**\*\*Before we get started, I want to thank all of you, because you've helped me reach a very important, personal milestone.\*\***

**\*\*I started writing and posting fanfiction here when I was fifteen. I posted several stories (none of which are really worth remembering). But the main story was called **\*\*\_\*\*A Drop of Sound\*\*\_\*\***. It was 20 chapters, and by the time I deleted it a couple years ago, it had reached 82 reviews. So it's been my goal to reach and surpass that number with one of my new stories. \*\***

**\*\*In eight chapters (less than half of DoS), **\*\*\_\*\*Among the Stars\*\*\_\*\*** has 82 reviews as I type this out. I just did the math, and all my stories collected have 253 reviews. So I just want to thank you guys for all your support. It really does mean so much to me.\*\***

**\*\*On a story related note, writing "Black" instead of "Black" is almost painful...\*\***

**\*\*Now, without further ado: Chapter 9!\*\***

Among The Stars

Chapter 9

Jack would have kicked himself, were the motion possible.

In the heat of the fight, he hadn't even considered that the wave of Fearling was a distraction while Black went after Rapunzel. He had been too busy trying to prove to the other Governors that he deserved the second chance they were giving him â€" and trying to keep the fight away from Toothiana's room, he hadn't realized that it would end up there in spite of his best efforts.

"Stop beating yourself up, Jack," Nightlight said, while they flew toward Toothiana's room, ignoring the fatigue both of them still felt after Maneuver 7.

"Tell me that when she's safe," Jack muttered.

They rounded the corner of the palace. Jack shuddered as he felt the icy hand of fear brush against the edges of his mind.

Fearlings hovered outside Toothiana's area of the balcony.

The wind responded to his anxiety and pick up speed, carrying him faster. He swung his staff at the Fearlings, who froze and fell away.

The door to Toothiana's room was open. The light had been turned off, but he could hear a fight going on. He could hear Toothiana, and Merida.

They flew in, Nightlight's glow, as well as that from Moonbean, wasn't enough to banish the heavy shadows. But it illuminated enough for Jack to see the shimmer of Toothiana's jewel toned feather while she dove at Black. Several of her fairies were with her, doing their best to combat Black and his Fearlings with their small fists, feet and wings. It was truly admirable, the fight they put up.

He saw the general smack Toothiana aside with one sickly grey hand, the force sending her into the wall.

"Black!"

The Nightmare King looked up. It might have been the light, but it seemed as though Black's gold eyes seemed to be more out of focus â€" more insane â€" every time Jack saw him.

"Frost." There was edge â€" and echo â€" to Black's voice. As though more than one voice was speaking. The Fearlings were taking over the man's mind, Jack realized. Which would certainly explain his crazed eyes.

Then, Black's lips twisted in a sick grin, eyes widening, as if Jack were the honored guest he had been waiting for.

"Ah, the hero of our story arrives," Black said. "Better late than never, I suppose."

Jack rolled his eyes at the overly dramatic words and tone.

"You really like the sound of your own voice, don't you?" he asked, adjusting his grip on his staff.

He waved subtly, signaling for Nightlight to check on Toothiana, who was slowly sitting up, her fairies fluttering around her in their best attempts to help their queen.

Nightlight nodded.

Black didn't even spare a glance for the spectral young man, his attention fixed on Jack.

"How fortunate, for you, princess," Black chuckled. "To be saved by a hero straight out of a storybook."

"Shut up." Jack didn't know where Black was heading, but he knew he didn't like it.

His eyes darted around the shadows, searching for Rapunzel.

"It's all straight out of a story, really," Black sighed, brushing imaginary dust of his perfectly pressed uniform.

Jack hated that uniform. It really just made the situation all the worse.

"The beautiful princess captured for her people, bravely facing whatever her captors throw at her â€" never complaining, even when threatened with her own death."

Jack cringed. He hadn't asked about Rapunzel's time in The Tower, not want to bring up any bad memories. But now he wished he had, because Black's hints were driving him mad, wondering just how bad her time there had been.

Black's voice was moving around the room, roving, searching.

"Rescued by a handsome hero with the mysterious past." He chuckled darkly. "And smart enough to hide you from an Imperial search, that is truly impressive, really. It seems inevitable that she would fall in love. What girl can resist a dashing hero, after all?"

Now Jack knew that wasn't something he wanted to hear through to the end.

So why couldn't he move?

He had made his choice â€" but part of the way he had made it was convincing himself Rapunzel wouldn't feel the same way. That her trust and attention was just gratitude for saving her.

"But no matter how romantic this story, the ending..." Black laughed. He was enjoying this. He was enjoying the swirl of emotion that held Jack in place.

And he knew Black had gotten it all from Jack's own mind. It was what the Fearling had pulled from him in the forest earlier, and had passed it on to Black the same way the fairies passed on gossip to Toothiana.

"Oh, the ending... Do you really thing there can be a happy ending, Princess? Do you think he would love you? The carefree pilot? And the princess? Really, it's too clichÃ©..."

Jack's eyes widened. What was Black playing at? Because he wasn't talking to Jack.

"There are no happy endings in real life, you know. So no matter how romantic the story, it will end in tragedy. I'm almost doing you a service, helping it play out this way, rather than the inevitable. You know I'm right. Why else would you be so afraid that he'll reject you?

"Oh yes, I can feel it. As much as you love him, with all your naÃ¯ve little heart, you know you will never, ever, find the happy ending you want so badly."

There was an audible sob.

Black chuckled.

And Jack realized this little show hadn't been about torturing or embarrassing him. It was about getting a reaction from Rapunzel so black could feel her exact location. That was what he had been searching for.

Jack dove toward the sound of Rapunzel's sob, raising his staff just in time to stop Black hand from landing on her.

He felt her hand on his shoulder, just a ghost of a touch over his hoodie. There was a question in the touch.

"Jack..." The brokenness was audible, and it was a knife in Jack's heart.

He wanted to tell her it was a lie. To assure her he felt the same. To hold her until her fears abated.

But there wasn't time. Not now.

"Nightlight!"

He didn't take his gaze from Black, holding his staff to keep the Nightmare King from getting closer. From the corner of his eye he saw Nightlight's glow come closer, until it was behind him.

"Your Highness."

"Go, Rapunzel."

Her hand slid from his back, and immediately missed her presence as he felt Nightlight lead her away.

The moment there was space he swung his staff, putting his mind back into the battle. A wave of ice shot toward the Nightmare King. The wind came in to strength the blow, and the force sent Black stumbling backwards.

Black made a wide gesture, and the Fearling obeyed, rushing to defend him.

But another wave of Jack's staff â€" another blast of ice â€" cut through the wraiths.

Another blast, before the man could defend himself, caused Black to stumble through the door, out of Toothiana's room â€" just as Jack had hoped.

On the balcony, while Black struggled to regain his balance, Jack reached back and slammed shut the bedroom door. One of them would turn on the light and they would be safe from the Fearlings still inside.

Satisfied that Rapunzel and his friends were safe, he turned his attention back on his opponent.

"Did I strike a nerve, Jack?"

Jack ignored his words, instead tightening his grip on his staff.

He evaluated the situation, the way Bunnymund had taught him. He was

really tired of making amateur mistakes tonight.

He hadn't gotten a full night's sleep, and Maneuver 7 had left him drained " this fight would have to be quick or Black would wear him out.

The lights in the gardens were bright but sparse, with more than enough shadows for the Fearlings to hide in.

His eyes landed on the eastern horizon, where he could see the beginnings of his only hope. He only had to hold out for a few minutes.

Black watched him warily, carefully, waiting for him to make the first move.

Good. He could use that to his advantage.

Shifting his grip again, he adjusted his stand.

Black had was twitching nervously.

Jack took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Black's nervousness surprised him, really. He had expected more patience from an Imperial general. Of course, then he remembered that the man was saturated with the darkest creatures in the universe. That would probably make anyone a little twitchy.

\_Why wait?\_ The wind asked, growing bored of this game it didn't understand.

Jack smiled faintly at the wind's impatience. A few years ago, he would have been the same.

Time had taught him patience though, just as North had always assured Bunnymund that it would. He had learned to wait for the opportune moment.

And the longer he waited, the more frantic Black became.

Jack watched his opponent carefully.

"If ya know what t' look for, your opponent will tell ya what he's gonna do as soon as he knows himself," Bunnymund had said.

It was a skill Nightlight had always been better at, which had just served to frustrate Jack further. But he had continued to train even after he had left Warren. Night light would probably always be more patient. But Black wasn't.

Finally Black could take no more, and he surged down the hallway, toward Jack, surrounded by a swarm of his Fearlings.

Jack was too drained to throw up a wall of ice. But he held his staff straight in front of him, thoughts focused on anything but his fears.

He thought about climbing the cliffs in the Sunset Mountains, sitting on the left, looking out at the landscape with Baby Tooth on his shoulder.



Even as the Fearlings raced toward him, he braced himself and fought back the deluge of darker thoughts that showed up to tug at the edge of his mind.

He thought about flying alongside the wolf pack as they ran across the snow covered forest floor, under the light of the full moon.

He could feel the Fearlings at his defenses, in search of the stray thread that would unravel the tapestry he had wrapped around his mind.

He thought of Rapunzel's smile.

One of the Fearlings recognized that thread, and the shadows connected to it. And it tried to pull at the thread, the possible weak link.

But Jack pulled the thread tighter, refusing to give fear a foothold. He had made his choice.

He could admit that somewhere between pulling her up through the air duct and now, he had falling in love with Rapunzel. And that meant he would do what was best for her, regardless of what would happen.

His staff quivered as it responded to Jack's determination. The frost along the gnarled wood glowed a brighter blue with each passing moment, until Jack felt his control over his powers slip, and he felt his center take control.

The pressure built until he thought it would break through his skin in desperation to get out if he didn't channel it.

With the last ounce of focus he could muster against the freezing burn of pressure, he took mental hold of his powers and directed it from his ribcage, down his arms and into his staff.

The ice crackled like a firework as it exploded from him to fill the air. Even behind his eyelids he could see the flashing. Vaguely he heard the screams of the Fearlings as they melted under the light, and Black cried out in pain. But those sounds were distant beyond his own blood pounding in his ears.

Finally the rush ended, taking with it the last of Jack's strength. He felt his body tremble, and leaned his weight on his staff just before he collapsed, breathing hard from the exertion.

Pitch lay spread eagled on the hall floor, the pose comical to the point of drawing a tired laugh from Jack.

He closed his eyes, his entire body pleading for sleep.

But a rustling sound made him open his eyes again and look around...

Now that the light had dissipated, the Fearlings were regrouping. He had initially scared them off, but now they knew he had no hope of fighting anymore.

Annoying creatures.

"Ni-" his voice was barely above a whisper. Jack shook his head and cleared his throat. "Nightlight!"

A moment later the door of Toothiana's room opened. The Fearlings edged closer to try and get into the room. But Moonbeam flared, blocking the doorway. The shadow creature recoiled back from the light. Nightlight looked between Jack and the fallen Nightmare King.

"What did you do?"

Jack shook his head, too tired to try and explain. Especially since he didn't even know what he had done.

Nightlight nodded in what appeared to be understanding as he stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him.

The Fearlings that had begun to regroup shuddered, and the friends looked over to watch them dart away or vanish as the first rays of sunlight spilled over the horizon, flooding the balcony with light.

"Sunrise," Nightlight murmured.

Sunlight.

He had made it.

Jack stumbled over to the wall to lean against it when he realized his staff could no longer handle the weight he was putting on it.

"I need to sleep."

"You need to talk to the princess," Nightlight murmured. "We're all too tired to rebind the Fearlings before nightfall, so they will be back with or without Black. You need to take away any edge they have over you."

"And what do I say?" Jack asked. "That yes I love her, but I have to stay here while she goes back to Corona?"

"You're assuming."

"I'm making an educated guess."

"You don't know that Jack."

"Nightlight, do I look capable of having this conversation right now?" His tone was harsher than intended.

He sighed. "Sorry. I just..." he shook his head. "I'm acting like Merida."

"And you don't have the excuse of being pregnant," Nightlight chuckled.

Jack rolled his eyes.

The sound of movements from his right made him look over. And even

with his tired eyes squinted against the brightening light, he realized he had made another amateur mistake. And while the list had been growing of late, this one would be his undoing.

Because he had taken his eyes off Black, thinking the Imperial was helpless now that the Fearlings were gone.

He had forgotten about the blaster now aimed at his chest. And he didn't have time to react before Black smirked and pulled the trigger.

The energy bolt burned through his chest, just below his heart.

Sometimes he really wished he would just listen to Nightlight.

## 10. Chapter 10

**\*\*Okay. This chapter is really short, but after last chapter, I figured you guys would like a quick update. And don't thank me yet...\*\***

**\*\*We are in the home stretch though, so there are only a couple more chapters.\*\***

Among The Stars

Chapter 10

Jack's chest was burning. The pain of the blaster bolt that had hit just under his heart was like fire in his chest cavity, so intense his brain couldn't form a thought. Everything was eclipsed by the burning, burning, burning pain.

His hands tried to get a grip on the wall he had been leaning against. But the smooth surface offered his hands no traction. His body slid down the wall, blinking to try and clear the haze creeping on the edge of his vision.

"Jack!" Nightlight's voice penetrated the fire, but still sounded worlds away. His friend muttered something that sounded dangerously like a swear. "Tooth! Come on, Jack. You are not getting off this easy."

"Did you just call this easy?" Jack hissed.

"Still Jack," Nightlight muttered.

Black laughed, hands braced on his knees as he tried to regain his balance.

But before he had a chance, Nightlight dove at the man. With his staff he knocked Black's blaster out of his hands.

They were moving too fast, and the fire was too hot for Jack to follow their fight.

He closed his eyes, and pressed a hand against the source of the fire

at his side. The reasonable part of his mind pointed out it wouldn't serve any purpose. But still he called on his powers, freezing his hand and his side.

He felt the ice spread over his skin, cooling and soothing... but the heat flared again, eating the ice. A few drops of water trickled down his side... or maybe it was blood.

It didn't really matter, his mind whispered.

The wind, so curious and childish, didn't understand what was happening. It knew something was wrong, and asked. Jack was too tired to explain. It always asked so many questions...

And he was so tired...

"Jack!"

He cracked his eyes open. His blurry vision was accosted by lime green, gold, pink, purple, grey... so many, so bright, that they hurt his eyes. He shut his eyes against all the colors.

A gasp, a flutter of wings, a familiar chirp.

"Hey, Baby Tooth," he whispered. He felt the breeze from her tiny wings before her weight settled on his shoulder and she nuzzled his neck.

"Oh, Jack," Toothiana whispered.

He cringed as slender fingers probed the burning at his side.

"J-Jack?"

Rapunzel.

He fought to open his eyes again, ignoring the brightness of the color that were Toothiana and Rapunzel. He searched for her, and found her crouched on his right.

Jack hesitated a moment... then realized there was no point with the last of his strength, he reached a hand up to the back of her neck. She gasped as he pulled her down to him, so her ear was by his mouth.

"I love you," he whispered. "What Black said... it was a lie."

His hand started to slip, but she caught it in her own, holding his palm to her cheek.

"I love you, too," she said.

Jack felt the corners of his mouth twitch in an attempt at a grin. "I know."

Their eyes met, and Jack considered raising his head the few inches to kiss her... but when he tried, he didn't have the strength.

Rapunzel leaned closer. Their noses brushed.

Her presence vanished and he heard her cry out in surprise and pain.

Jack's eyes opened just in time to see Toothiana fly past him. He followed her flight path and growled when he saw Black had grabbed Rapunzel's hair and was dragging her toward him. The man knocked Toothiana aside, sneering at Jack as he tightened his grip on Rapunzel's hair.

"I will make sure you fail," Black hissed.

Grimacing, he ran his hand over the floor in search of his staff, even though he knew he wouldn't be able to create a single snowflake.

"No!"

He forgot about his staff and looked back toward Rapunzel. She had turned and dug her heels into the polished wood floor of the hallway.

"I am not going back!" She grabbed a thick lock of her hair and flung it like a whip. The ends coiled around Black's wrist. The man's eyes went wide, as did Jack's.

Rapunzel flicked her wrist with more strength than Jack had thought she had in her small body, and the general stumbled to the side out.

Jack decided he could die relatively happy if the last thing he saw was Rapunzel defending herself so well. (And he took back every bad thought he had ever had about her hair.)

Black screamed, and Jack's eyes opened. (Again.)

He looked at Black, who screamed as though he were on fire. His gold eyes were dilated, staring at the hand still wrapped in Rapunzel's hair.

The strands of hair had begun to glow, light radiating from Rapunzel's scalp. As they stared, Jack saw Pitch's grey hand begin to change color, returning to a warm, fleshy pink. The color spread from his hand up his arm, over his neck and face.

Black screamed again, just as Jack felt his last ounce of energy drain from him.

His chest was still burning. But the heat had begun to fade. Not because his control over the ice was returning, but because all his senses were fading.

He heard Rapunzel call his name, but she was so far away...

Then, through the darkness that had enveloped him, a golden glow grew brighter, chasing away the darkness until all he knew was the light.

The burning stopped.

## 11. Chapter 11

**\*\*Chapter 11. Wow. I thought this story was going to be 4 or 5 chapters at most... but now it's at 11... and the last arc of the story keeps growing...\*\***

Among The Stars

Chapter 11

Jack tried not to think too much about how he was there. The moment he let that spool of thought begin to unwind in his mind, too many questions and not enough answers threatened to drive him crazy.

He had woken up with a suspicious lack of pain. And when he had pulled off his hoodie to look at his chest, the skin under his heart had been unmarred. He would have thought it had all been a dream. Except he had woken up fully dressed, which he knew wasn't the case when he had gone to bed. Then there was the frost: on the edges of his hoodie, the sheets of his bed. And when he had set his feet on the floor, he had watched the fern-like frost spread over the carpet.

And there was still a charred hole in his hoodie where the blaster bolt had burned its way through to his skin.

The sun had been up for a few hours, but the halls were empty. He guessed everyone else had been sleeping off the battle. The only people who had been up were a few yetis, elves and Bunnymund's egg shaped helpers, most of whom he found in the kitchen when his growing stomach drove him in that direction. It was a little frustrating to be surrounded by creatures he couldn't understand.

Needing something to do, he had flown back to Winter (after getting something to eat from the kitchens â€" along with a few pieces of Bunnymund's chocolate). He had hoped that surveying his territory would distract him for a couple hours. Otherwise, he knew he would go crazy waiting for someone to wake up so he could ask them why he wasn't dead. And, while it was a reasonable question he thought, most of his friends were the type to be extremely grumpy when woken up too early.

The walls of the ice palace, in the heart of Winter, on the edge of the forest, were made of thick blue ice.

Jack had gone all out making it, though he didn't spend much time there. It had mostly been for fun â€" a chance to master finger control over his powers. Hence the tower that was really just a spiraling slide.

He had covered his entire territory, relieved to see there were no hold out of Fearlings even in the thickets parts of the forest, before heading to the palace mostly because he needed something else to do. He wasn't ready to go back to Warren. Because as much as he wanted answers, part of him was wary of them.

As he stretched out on the couch made of ice â€" covered in several furs for some cushion â€" he wondered if he had always been so quick

to imagine the worst case scenarios, or if it was a souvenir from his time as an Imperial.

Jack glanced over at the white wolf who lay on the bearskin rug in one corner of the room.

"I never thought I'd be so confused to be alive," he admitted.

Isolfr lifted his head from where it had rested on his paws, and opened his blue-grey eyes to look at Jack.

When Jack had left Warren, Isolfr's father Frodi had been the pack's alpha male. But it was Isolfr who had been waiting for him at the arched doorway of the ice palace, as was the duty of the alpha male. Without asking, Jack had known it meant the older wolf had died while he was gone. One more reminder that life had kept going while he had been away. And it confirmed to him that he wouldn't be leaving again.

\_You humans think too much,\_ Isolfr said, returning his head to his paws.

Jack rolled his eyes, and wondered vaguely if the yetis were so quick to insult North's intelligence.

Just like North could understand the yetis, Bunnymund understood his Warrior Eggs, and Toothiana could speak with her fairies, Jack was capable of understanding the wolves in Winter. Though if he wanted to talk to a wolf in any other territory, he needed a member of the Winter pack to translate for him, something they had done with the wolves in Santoff Claussen when he was sixteen.

Jack leaned his head back.

A small breeze had come to tell him earlier that the others in Warren had woken up. But he still wasn't ready to go back.

Another breeze swept in, swirling over to him with a level of excitement that made him quirk an eyebrow curiously. The wind was almost always excited to a level, but it took a lot to get it beyond that.

\_The one like the sun is coming.\_

Jack chuckled. The wind had little interest in names, and it was interesting to hear the way it referred to his friends. This one was new, but it could only be Rapunzel â€" and it certainly fit. A moment later, Isolfr lifted his head, ears perked and sniffing at the air.

\_Someone's here.\_

Jack stood up and left the room. He reached the landing that overlooked the palace entryway just as he heard Rapunzel came through the arched entryway. He hadn't bothered with doors when he had built the palace â€" he hadn't felt like sculpting hinges from ice.

"Jack?"

"Up here," he said.

Her eyes, which had been staring at the details in the ice wall, jumped up to where he leaned against the ice banister. A grin crept to his lips unbidden as he looked down at her. Thought the expression was a little nervous, considering his confession the night before.

"You're all right!" she said, with a bright smile.

"Yup." He vaulted over the railing, the wind catching him and lowering him lightly to the floor in front of her. "I'm guessing you had something to do with that?"

Rapunzel blushed. Someone (Toothiana, probably) had prepared her for her trip to Winter. She wore a long, fur-lined purple cloak, a pair of boots and thick leggings. Her hair was braided in the way he had become used to, but it still trailed on the floor behind her.

"Have you measure that?" he asked, nodding to the golden river of hair.

"Seventy feet," she said. "That's the estimate, anyway."

"That's a lot of hair," he said, brow quirking again as he tried to get his head around the number. "I saw what you did to Black last night."

Her cheeks darkened even further, and she looked away modestly. "Bunny says my hair purged the shadows out of him."

"Cottontail's usually right about things like that." And from what he had seen, it made sense. Not that he had a clue how it could have worked.

"When I saw it, all I could think of what that maybe... maybe it could save you. So I pressed it to your chest, over the shot. When the glow faded, your chest was healed and you were asleep. Nightlight took you back to your room â€" he said you had been exhausted before Black..." she trailed off. "I- I wanted to stay with you, but Tooth said I should get some sleep as well."

"Thanks," Jack said. Not sure exactly what part he was thanking her for. Though for saving his life certainly stood out as the most obvious.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Jack chuckled. "You've gotta stop asking me that, Punz â€" I'm fine. You?"

"I wasn't the one who got shot last nigh- Oh."

Jack followed her gaze back to the top of the stairs, where Isolfr was coming down the steps, eyes fixed on the princess.

"He's beautiful," Rapunzel said, watching the wolf with transfixed eyes.



Jack leaned on his staff, watching Isolfr carefully as he walked past the Winter Governor and headed directly for Rapunzel. The wolf sniffed at her curiously, then rubbed up against her coat.

She giggled and crouched down to scratch the wolf behind the ears.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Jack couldn't bite it back, staring as the wolf's tail began to wag, his head pushing into Rapunzel's hand. "If I tried that, he'd bite my hand off."

"No he wouldn't â€" he's a big sweetheart," Rapunzel cooed, not looking away from the wolf she was lavishing her attention on.

"Uh-huh." Jack rolled his eyes and looked away. He was not jealous of the wolf. He was not. He refused to be!

But he looked back after a moment... and felt his lips twitch in a grin at the sight of her smile â€" even as she continued to coo and giggle at Isolfr. If the wolf could elicit that smile... maybe he wasn't so bad.

She will be a good mate for you.

And like that, Jack remembered why he didn't like the creature at the same time he felt blood rush to his face. "How about you keep your opinions to yourself, fur ball!"

The wolf barked in laughter.

Rapunzel looked between Jack and the wolf she was still scratching. "Can you talk to him?"

Jack nodded, hand over his face to cover his flushed cheeks, and fairly sure he wasn't capable of speech.

"What did he say?"

"Don't ask," he muttered. He glared at Isolfr through his fingers.

Apparently satisfied, the wolf turned and left the palace, no doubt returning to the pack.

"He'll be back," Jack said, when he saw Rapunzel's crestfallen expression. "Unfortunately."

"How did you ever leave this place?" Rapunzel asked.

Jack chuckled again and started up the stairs, gesturing for her to follow him. He propped his staff against his shoulder.

"Teen rebellion, I guess," he admitted. Then he shook his head. "No. The trust is that I was scared. Tsar Lunar chooses the Governors, and he chose me when I was fourteen. I didn't fully understand what it mean. So when I turned seventeen, and the responsibility started hitting me, I convinced myself I would rather be a pilot and joined the academy. Cottontail told me not to come back, so after I was kicked out of the academy I didn't know what to do. I met Hiccup on

accident â€" he had just run away from Berk and was finding that people didn't like hiring a ship with a one man crew. Especially when that one man comes from a planet of space pirates. It worked out for us to stick together.

"A few months later Merida stowed away while we were on BunBroch and we couldn't send her back without feeling like hypocrites. And, of course, Merida has her own way of convincing people.

"And I just realized you're going to freeze if you stay in here," he sighed, turning back to face her. "Sorry."

"I'm fine," she assured.

Jack shook his head. "I would really rather you not get sick â€" we've been through enough in the past few days."

He turned to lead her back down the hallway they had just come down. But before he could pass her, a small hand caught his wrist and he stopped. His heart skipped a beat at the skin contact of her fingers around his hand.

"Jack."

His nervousness rushed back at her tone, every muscle in his body tense with the memory of the night before. Why, he wasn't sure. But he still was.

"Can- can we talk?" she asked. Her voice was barely a whisper, but it echoed off the blue ice that made up the wall.

Jack sighed. "All right."

He led her into the room he had been in before she arrived â€" what Toothiana called his parlor, though he wasn't sure that was the right word. It was the only room set up for anyone with a warm body that needed to talk to him badly enough to brave the cold rather than just wait for him to return to a warmer territory. Toothiana had provided him with several blankets and furs (since she was usually the one who came to talk to him).

"Jack, did you mean what you said last night?" Rapunzel asked, after taking a seat on the couch.

Jack remained standing, leaning on his staff.

"Of course." It came out just above a whisper, and he found he couldn't look at her from embarrassment, though the feeling still made no sense.

She didn't respond for a moment, and he looked over to see her staring down at her hands, which she was worrying in her lap, while she worried her lower lip between her teeth.

All the worst case scenarios he had come up with in the past week came rushing back to him, even beyond the obvious. Thoughts of her changing her mind, or her admitting her parents already had her betrothed to someone else.

"Punz." He knelt down in front of her, reaching out to try and still

her hands before her nails broke the skin she was scraping in her agitation. "It's okay."

But the moment his skin touched hers she pulled her hands away and stood up, walking to the far side of the room.

Jack frowned. His instinct was to reach out to her, but her reaction to his touch held him back. "Rapunzel?"

"I-" She let out a shuddering breath. "Jack-"

Jack finally risked a step forward. But when he reached out to touch her shoulder she flinched away.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"How can you love me?" she asked. "\_You\_"

Jack leaned on his staff, still frowning as he tried to understand what was going on. He wished he could brush it off as another example of women being crazy... but he was too involved this time.

"Should \_I\_ be asking the question, Princess?"

"I'm not good enough, Jack."

The wind picked him up before realizing he had given it the command and set him down in front of her.

"How can you say that?" he asked.

She refused to meet his gaze. "I'm never good enough."

"What?"

"You said you never heard of Corona before you saw my name in the Tower computer, right?"

"Yeah." Jack frowned. "And I notice you haven't said much about it." He had thought it was homesickness that kept her from talking about her homeworld... but her expression gave him the impression it might have been something else. "You haven't said anything about going back, either."

"Because I..." she sighed. "Jack, my parents... I'm the first born. By Corona law, I should be the heir to the throne. But the council â€" one of the council men, his son courted me a few years ago. But I realized he was only interested in my title. But when I said no, his father began to say that I wasn't capable of ruling on my own. They put so much pressure on my father he agreed to make my younger brother the heir."

"After the years of training I've gone through to prepare for the throne, I didn't understand how they could turn on me. I've done everything they ever asked of me, every challenge they ever gave me." She sighed. "I know I shouldn't... it's not so much that I'm upset about not getting the crown. I just wondered why I wasn't good enough. What \_hadn't\_ I done? Or what had I done wrong?"

"Rapunzelâ€" "

She cut him off before he could reassure her. "In the tower."

Jack's breath caught in his throat.

"Gothel was just like Black," she said quietly. "She kept..." her voice broke. "She kept telling me that no one would come rescue me. My people couldn't make a move with the blockade, and the media was silenced. No one who could rescue me knew I was there. And even if they did, they wouldn't care. She said I wasâ€" "

"Rapunzel."

She stopped talking, but still didn't look up at him.

"Rapunzel," he whispered. He touched her cheek, running his fingers down her jaw, gently lifting her chin so their eyes met.

He actually knew what he wanted to say... but when their eyes met, he put that on the shelf for the time being.

Instead... he kissed her.

He felt, rather than heard, he breath catch in surprise. But just before he started to pull back, she leaned in, small hands wrapping around the folds of his shirt.

He would have liked to stay there for a long, long time...

"Jack!"

But apparently that wasn't an option.

Rapunzel started to step back, but Jack tightened his arm around her waist to keep her close even as he broke the kiss and turned to glare at Nightlight, who hovered in the doorway.

"Can't it wait-"

"Gothel is dead," Nightlight said over Jack's protest.

#

"We need t' talk about your habit of bein' late," Bunnymund said, with a pointed look at Jack as he followed Nightlight into the war room in Warren palace. The Pooka's green eyes glanced down at Jack and Rapunzel's joined hands, eyebrows raising â€" but he didn't comment. And Jack thought he saw a flash of approval.

"I was trying to take care of my responsibilities," Jack said.

"Is that what you call it?" Nightlight muttered.

Rapunzel squeaked, and when Jack turned to glare at his friend, he could see her blushing bright pink from the corner of his eye.

Merida snorted, and Jack wondered how much of the joke she had gotten

â€" or if she was just amused at the thought of him taking care of his responsibilities. She and Hiccup were seated at the table near North.

Jack took his own seat next to Nightlight. Rapunzel took the chair on his other side, and he didn't let go of her hand. He knew she still needed reassurance that he didn't have time to give, and only hoped his hold would help convince her.

"What happened?" he asked, glancing at the other Governors.

"There was a coup on Pallash last night," Kathrine said. "We don't know yet if it was rebels who infiltrated the military, or if the military just got tired of Gothel."

"Normally, we wouldn't have much reason to notice â€" we try to stay out of galactic politics," Bunnymund said, his eyes looking at Rapunzel. "But the important part is that the blockade on Corona has been lifted. \_The Night Fury\_ can take you home as soon as you'd like, Princess."

## 12. Chapter 12

**\*\*Remember a couple chapters ago when I said we were in the home stretch? Yeah... not so. The story has taken on a life of its own, and I'm just gonna let it run its course â€" I hope you guys enjoy the ride!\*\***

**\*\*Last chapter, I forgot to tell you guys that this story cracked 100 reviews! Thank you guys so much for all your wonderful comments! They really do motivate me to keep working so hard on this story.  
\*\***

**\*\*And because someone asked: Yes, you are free to picture HTTYD2 Hiccup in this story. He's not quite as confident or daredevil, but yeah. XD\*\***

**\*\*For this chapter, I'm sorry if it feels repetitive. But I wanted to be clear in case anyone still had questions about why Merida didn't tell Hiccup she was pregnant. And I wanted to show that she and Jack really are friends â€" when he's not her verbal punching bag...\*\***

**\*\*Also, toward the end of this chapter, for Jack and Hiccup's formal clothing, picture Eugene's outfit from the end of **\*\*\_\*\*Tangled\*\*\_\*\***, except in the specified colors. I'm planning to do some sketches of what the characters look like/wear in this story, and I'll post those on my tumblr (songofafreeheart, if you're interested).\*\***

**\*\*Now, on to chapter 12 â€" i.e. the eye contact chapter! (Someone please, please, catch the reference to **\*\*\_\*\*Sticks & Stones\*\*\_\*\***, the song from **\*\*\_\*\*How To Train Your Dragon\*\*\_\*\***.)\*\***

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 12\_

Without the wind talking to him, his head felt strangely silent in the vastness of deep space. Or rather, his head was a chaos of

screaming thoughts, but even the familiar thrum of \_The Night Fury's\_ engines wasn't enough to distract or even sooth him.

Jack glared at the molten light outside the viewport, watching orange fade to white, dark red, green, yellow. He heard footsteps coming toward him, but didn't glance back.

"Ye should sleep, Frost."

"I don't feel like it," he muttered, blinking to try and banish the heaviness tugging at his eyelids. He didn't glance over at Merida as she came to sit in the chair beside him. He had to remind himself it was the copilot's chair, not Rapunzel's.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?" he countered, hoping for a distraction.

She shook her head, looking out the viewport. "I ain't tired.

"I'm gonna remind you of that in nine months," Jack chuckled, though it came out darker than he had intended.

Merida chuckled, and when he glanced over he saw her hands resting on her lower belly.

He wondered idly what it was like, to have another being â€" another \_person\_ â€" growing inside you.

He thought about his powers, the way they charged, surged and swelled inside him... but he imagined a pregnancy would feel completely different. It didn't move to different parts of your body, or try to explode through your skin if you didn't channel it. The two sensations were vastly different, no doubt. But he imagined it was an even more powerful sensation in its own way. How could it not be? It was another \_life\_.

Beyond that, he wondered what it was like to be a parent. Something about Hiccup and Merida had shifted, though he couldn't describe what it was â€" other than the grin Hiccup couldn't seem to shake every time he looked at Merida (or seemingly every time Jack glanced at his friend). What was it like to know you had created something more substantial than a layer of frost on a window â€" something that was literally a part of you physically as well as spiritually? Even more, a part you and the person you loved.

He wondered...

He shook his head before he could connect that thought to Rapunzel and himself. It would just hurt, so why even go there?

"I keep imaginin' what ma mum'll say if I tell her," Merida said. She had either noticed Jack's gaze, or was just lost in her own thoughts of her pregnancy.

"Have you even told her you're married?" Jack asked. The distraction from his own thoughts was a relief.

"No," she said. "I haven't talked to her since Hiccup said I had t' tell her where I was if he was gonna let me stay onboard. I didn't want t' see 'er face, since I swore I'd never marry."

Jack snorted. "And you gave me a hard time for reconsidering my stance on marriage."

They were quiet for several minutes, both looking out the ships viewport, alone in their own thoughts.

"Ye didn't have t' come, ya know," Merida said at last.

"Yes I did," Jack said. "I promised I would keep her safe until we got her home â€" I'm going to see it through."

"Even though it's killin' ya?"

"This from the one who accused me of using her." Jack managed to say it without snapping â€" but his tone was still harsh.

Another moment of silence between them, this time awkward.

"Sorry," Jack sighed.

"Nah, I know ya better than that," Merida said. She shook her head. "I just dunno how ya can let her go like this."

"Yeah, well, I knew this was how it was going to end," he said. "Even if she wasn't a princess... I can't leave Warren again. I gave Hiccup my resignation, for lack of a better word."

"Did he tell ya North offered 'im a place in the fleet?"

Jack shook his head. After the meeting in the war room he had avoided everyone, not trusting his emotions for fear they would explode. He had only told Hiccup to call him when they were leaving, then he had flown back to the ice palace.

"Would ya mind if we stayed on Warren?"

Jack glanced over. "What kind of question is that?"

Merida shrugged. "Figured I'd ask."

"Nah. I'd be glad to have you guys there, to be honest." He grinned, feeling the expression for the first time since he'd realized they were taking Rapunzel home. "You're not in contact with your brothers, so someone's gotta play uncle and spoil your kid."

Merida groaned, but when he glanced over he caught her mirroring his grin.

"Hey, Mer?"

"Hmm?"

"Why didn't you tell us?" he asked. "Or at least Hiccup. I mean, I'm just the pilot. But I've been wondering, 'cause it seems like the kind of thing you'd want to tell him right away."

"I wanted t', when I first found out," she said. "But when I thought about it, I knew the baby would change everythin'. I just didn't know how I was gonna tell Hiccup."

"Did you really think he'd fight you?"

"I dunno."

Jack looked back out the viewport. There really wasn't anything to see, though the shifting colors were more interesting than the illuminated buttons and switches, and the backlit computer screens.

"Are ya really gonna let it end like this?"

Jack's lips pressed together in a thin line. He didn't have an answer.

He tried not to think about the kiss, though it was burned onto the lips he was pressing together. For a moment, he had forgotten that she would go home. Or maybe a foolish part of him had thought, when he realized she wasn't the heir to Corona's throne, that maybe she would stay with him.

Now he wished he hadn't kissed her. It just made the situation so much more painful.

"Ya need t' at least talk to her," Merida said.

Jack still didn't respond. He didn't know what to say, either to Merida or Rapunzel.

"She was lookin' for ya after ya took off," Merida said. "I could tell she was waitin' for ya t' get back, but ya didn't even look at 'er when we were gettin' onboard. And she's too scared t' come in 'ere. I'd be mad, if I couldn't see this was tearin' ya apart."

"What am I supposed to say?" he finally asked.

Merida didn't answer right away. And when he looked over, he saw her mouth was pressed together.

She didn't have an answer.

#

Jack looked through the viewport on the green, fold and blue planet in front of him. Her home world. And, while he hated to admit it, it suited her in a way. Not as well as Warren would have, though, he thought.

Jaw clenched, he turned his gaze to the two Imperial Carriers that orbited the planet.

North had already contacted the royal family and told them they were bringing Rapunzel home, so that was taken care of at least. From what Hiccup had explained, since he had been a part of the communication, an Imperial ambassador had already arrived to make sure Corona bore no ill will for the blockade, and to begin searching for the lost princess. Apparently said ambassador now hoped to make amends to Rapunzel personally, now that she'd been found.



The comm unit chimed as they were hailed.

"Unidentified vessel, this is Corona air traffic control," said a pleasant female voice when he accepted the hail. "Please identify yourself and your purpose on Corona."

It was nothing like returning to Warren. Despite his anxiety at being kicked back into space, there had been a glimmer of joy at the sound of Nightlight's voice over the comm. Now, he was having a hard time not hating the woman speaking to him.

"Air traffic control, this is \_The Night Fury\_," Jack said, careful to keep his dislike out of his voice. "We're here to bring Princess Rapunzel home."

"We've been waiting for you, \_Night Fury\_."

The obvious smile in the woman's voice made his teeth grind. If he'd had his powers, the cockpit probably would have been an ice box. He knew his feelings were wrong, but was having a hard time squelching them.

"I'm sending you the coordinates to the royal landing pad now. Their majesties will be there to greet you."

"Thanks."

Jack tapped the screen of the computer, accepting the string of coordinates that flashed on the screen.

"Jack?"

Rapunzel voice caused his hands to tighten around the ship's yolk.

"We're getting ready to land," he said, throat tight. "You should get ready."

He didn't glance back, but he heard her retreating footsteps.

Brushing her off was not going to help, he knew. If anything, it would make things worse â€" especially with her feelings of inadequacy. But he still didn't know what he could say.

#

Before they had left Warren, Toothiana had brought him another blue hoodie to replace the one Black's shot had ruined. He wore the new one now, and the familiarity gave some comfort despite the situation. It was extremely casual for meeting royalty â€" but he had a hard time caring as he buckled on his utility belt.

He rounded the corner to the ship's loading area and his eyes locked with Rapunzel â€" something he had avoided the entire trip. The pain in her wide eyes made his heart clench, and he wanted to say \_something\_. There had to be a right thing to say in this situation. But he didn't have any idea what it might be, or how to find.

"Jack."

He looked back at her, hoping...

She opened her mouth to say something, but didn't get a chance, as the ramp had reached the ground, and they could see the welcome party approaching them across the landing pad.

"Rapunzel!"

Her green eyes widened and she looked down the ramp to a brunette woman who had broken from the party and was running toward the ship.

"Mother!" Rapunzel's face brightened and she ran to meet the woman.

Someone must have shoved one of Merida's more vicious knives into his heart. That was how it felt, at least.

"And the ironic part is ya didn't wanna admit anythin' was wrong when we were back in the tower," Merida said.

"Not helping," Jack muttered. He crossed his arms, hoping that if he held his chest together it would ease some of the pain... but the pain wasn't physical, so there was nothing he could do to alleviate it.

"Guys."

They looked at Hiccup, who nodded down the ramp.

Merida accepted the hand her husband held out to her (Jack didn't miss his friend's grin), and the three descended the ramp into the bright Corona sunlight.

A man, probably King Thomas, had joined mother and daughter, hugging them both with visible relief.

Jack felt like an absolute jerk.

"I'm fine," he heard Rapunzel assure her parents as they got closer.

King Thomas looked up as \_The Night Fury\_'s crew approached.

"Thank you," he said, his voice breaking as he looked between them. "All of you. I- I can'tâ€"

Jack looked away, wishing he was anywhere else. Being locked in the ice palace with Isolfr would be better than this (if the palace actually had doors, let alone locks â€" but that was beside the point). The dagger in his heart was twisted viciously by the father's gratitude.

His head was starting to ache as well.

At least Hiccup was taking care of the formalities.

"We're glad we could help," Hiccup said, and Jack thought he heard a

note of reluctance in his friend's voice. "This is my wife, Merida. And Jack Frost, of Warren."

And like that, he wasn't the pilot of The Night Fury. He didn't really mind â€" he had shed the position mentally. But if he were just a pilot, maybe he could have stayed here with Rapunzel.

Right, he thought bitterly. Because she would ever be allowed to marry a pilot.

His left hand flexed, missing the wind, as his throat tightened.

This was the worst experience he had ever endured â€" even more so than being kicked off Warren; then being homeless after he'd been kicked out of the Academy. Both paled in comparison to this.

Queen Adela finally looked at them, still holding onto her daughter. "Please, join us for dinner. Let us thank you somehow."

"We would be honored," Hiccup said.

Jack's gaze landed on Rapunzel â€" exactly where he had been trying not to look â€" and their eyes met.

He felt as though he was going to be sick.

They followed the royal family to the edge of the landing pad where three men waited. One, a brunette like both the king and queen (where had Rapunzel's golden hair come from?), in an embroidered jacket similar to the king's, was probably her brother â€" Augustus, according to the information he had finally looked up in the nav computer.

Another â€" in an Imperial military uniform â€" seemed to be there only as a guard to the third man, who was dressed in a formal outfit Jack recognized as the current trend for higher ranking officials on Pallas. The Imperial ambassador, he guessed.

Augustus hugged his sister (Jack wasn't sure what to think of him), murmuring something Jack couldn't hear.

"Your highness." The ambassador bowed, drawing Rapunzel's attention to him. Jack grimaced when he kissed the back of her hand. "On behalf of the New Empire, I would like to extend my deepest apologies for what you have been through in the past months. We are eager to do all within our power to make up for your experience.

How did they plan to make up for mental torture? Jack wondered. He had to look away and shove his hands in the pocket of his hoodie before anyone realized they were clenched to the point of shaking.

"Rapunzel, your hair!" Queen Adela gasped, finally seeing the long trail of gold behind her daughter.

"Oh, I-" Rapunzel bit her lower lip. "It-" She looked at Jack, silently asking for his help in explaining.

"It's Warren," Jack said. He was amazed he could actually form the words. "Certain people develop special abilities when exposed to Warren's atmosphere. Rapunzel had the ability to heal with her hair."

"Had?" Thomas asked warily.

"The powers fade as soon as you leave Warren," Jack explained. "I don't know why her hair grew. But other than that, there's no physical side effects."

"Are you sure?" Adela asked. He saw her arm tighten around her daughter's shoulder.

"I'm fine, Mother," Rapunzel tried to assure. But her parents were looking at Jack.

"Yes," he said. "I left Warren for four years and I was fine."

"You have an ability?" the queen asked.

"Jack is the Governor of the Winter territory," Rapunzel said. "He controls ice and snow. And the wind."

"I don't control the wind," he corrected, lips twitching in a smile. "She's more of an ally."

"You can talk to the wolves, though."

It was the first time they had spoken since their kiss. Her eyes pleaded with him. For what, Jack didn't know.

"Only the Winter pack," he said.

He didn't look away from her eyes, in the hope he would see what she wanted him to do or say.

"You're still amazing, Jack," she said. It was a near whisper, but he heard it clearly.

\_Tsar Lunar, help me,\_ Jack thought. Now he had to look away.

But not before he saw the way her parents glanced between them.

Everyone was still for a moment, and Jack wished again that he was anywhere else.

Then the king cleared his throat and they continued to the speeders that would take them to the palace.

#

The palace of Corona was all towers and spires, built from off white stones and blue shingles. The air was saturated with the smell of flowers, fresh air and salt water. It was actually a beautiful sight â€" if Jack had been in a mood to appreciate it.

A suite of rooms, as well as formal clothing in the Corona style, were provided for them, and they were left alone for a couple hours

to get ready for dinner.

As Rapunzel followed her parents to the royal wing, Jack was reminded of their arrival on Warren (not even three days earlier). Only their situations were reversed. She didn't need his comfort over their separation because she was with her family again. And the dynamic between them had completely shifted.

Maybe Pitch had been right, Jack thought, as he stood under the jet of water coming from the shower head in his bathroom.

The thought of Rapunzel's blush when he had hidden her in his shower unit on *The Night Fury* " the way she refused to look at him in his boxers " made him smile faintly. But the amusement soon turned painful and he had to push the thought away.

Maybe Pitch had hit on something Jack had wondered, but hadn't wanted to consider.

Maybe Rapunzel's feelings for him hadn't really been love. Maybe it was just gratitude to him for saving her. Maybe he had mistaken his desire to protect her as more than it really was.

Maybe there wasn't really a difference between her and the fairy, and the snow fox, and all the other animals and children he had saved or helped over the years. Maybe he'd just gotten confused because she was the first human female in his age range " and there was no denying she was beautiful.

That didn't make sense, though. Because he had rescued other women his age in his time on *The Night Fury* " they had a habit of rescuing people and then running for their lives because of it. And a few had expressed interest in him.

But he had never been interested in return. (Actually, he had liked Baby Tooth and the snow fox more than some of them.)

And if this wasn't love, why did he feel as though his spirit was being ripped in two?

Jack pressed his forehead against the tiled wall of the shower in an attempt to alleviate the confusion induced pressure mounting in his head.

Hot water streamed through his hair, his neck, his back, his legs, before spiraling down the drain.

He couldn't deny his feelings were genuine.

But maybe Rapunzel's weren't. Maybe the whole clich  of the princess falling in love with the hero was a clich  because love had nothing to do with it " maybe it was gratitude masquerading as something stronger.

The thoughts made the knife in his heart twist again. But if Rapunzel felt the same, wouldn't she want to stay with him?

Or maybe...

Maybe.

He was sick of maybe.

He wished he hadn't come to Corona. Like Merida had said, it wasn't necessary.

He wished he had never left Warren in the first place. That he had just accepted his responsibility instead of running like a coward. Then he never would have had to endure this hell.

But that would mean he never would have met Hiccup.

Without him, Hiccup probably wouldn't have been hired to deliver supplies to DunBroch (as he had told Rapunzel, no one had been willing to hire Hiccup before he'd been able to say he had a crew member).

And if Hiccup hadn't gone to DunBroch, Merida would have either been stuck there in an arranged marriage, or would have stowed away on another ship. Jack tried not to think how easily that latter option could have turned into a nightmare for his friend.

But if they hadn't met, and married, their child would never have been created. And that felt... wrong.

Jack shook his head, wondering if it was strange he already felt so protective of his friends' unborn child. But then, he had always liked kids.

He couldn't regret his time with The Night Fury. And meeting Rapunzel was what had gotten him back to Warren, so he couldn't regret meeting her.

"It still hurts," he muttered, shutting off the stream of water.

He realized he was talking to himself and shook his head, droplets of water splattering across the white tiles of the shower.

The outfit he'd been provided was clean-cut and formal, simple compared to what the royal family wore (for which Jack was extremely grateful). A pair of simple black slacks, a dark blue shirt with cuffed sleeves and a black leather vest.

Jack swallowed a grimace. He hated formal clothing, especially when it was fitted, as these obviously would be. And he couldn't say he was fond of the style. But he knew forgoing it would be an insult to his hosts. And his ears were still ringing with Bunnymund's reminder that he was a representative of Warren while he was on Corona.

He rolled his eyes at the memory of that conversation. Diplomacy had never been one of his strengths. A broken heart certainly wasn't going to change that. It would make it even worse, if anything.

His hands froze on the zipper of the slacks he had just pulled on.

Was that what this was? A broken heart?

That explained why his body felt fine... but the pain was almost debilitating.

Jack was shrugging into a formal black vest on over the dark blue shirt he'd been provided with when there was a knock on his door.

"Come in."

For a moment he hoped it was Rapunzel. But he knew the knock was too strong. And when he looked back, Merida was in the doorway, wearing an aqua colored dress that matched her eyes.

"I don't want to hear it," he said as he started on the buckles of the vest.

Merida raised her hands in defense. "I just wanted t' make sure ye were all right."

It was almost laughable, really. He had assured Rapunzel that he was fine every time she asked that question. But the answer changed as soon as someone else asked.

"No, I'm not," he admitted.

He felt like he was dying, actually.

But he finished the last buckle of his vest and turned to face her. "But I have to be."

Merida frowned, and Jack guessed the uncharacteristic kindness in her eyes was maternal instinct starting to kick in. "We could make yer excuses."

"Careful, Princess â€" your tiara is showing." Jack chuckled as he slipped past her through the door, into the common room that connected the apartments they'd been given. He was going through the motions, and his voice was flat even to his own ears. But playing at normalcy helped.

He stretched his arms above his head, cringing as the heavy fabric of the vest constricted his ribcage.

"I'm just sayin'," Merida shrugged. "Ya clearly ain't handlin' this well."

"She's right," Hiccup said, coming out of his and Merida's room. The formal outfit he had been provided with was the same cut as Jack's, but the shirt was green while the vest was dark brown. "We can cover for you."

"And what happens if Merida's morning sickness hits again and you both have to leave?" Jack glanced over at the red head, who had left his doorway to sit on the couch next to Hiccup while he pulled his boots on. "No offense."

Merida rolled her eyes. Not offended, but clearly exasperated.

"Besides, I kinda owe Cottontail â€" I can't mess up again."

"Ye are gonna wear boots, right?"

Jack grimaced as he looked down at his bare feet.

### 13. Chapter 13

**\*\*Chapter 13. The opening to this gave me such a hard time, because I have such a hard time writing about politics. I also don't like writing large groups scenes. Someone always gets lost in the middle. (Poor Sandy...) \*\***

**\*\*Okay. Anyone here who has read any of the **\*\*\_\*\*Star Wars **\*\*\_\*\*EU books (especially **\*\*\_\*\*New Jedi Order**\*\*\_\*\* and beyond), you may have noticed that, yes, I got a little lazy, and the ambassador's last name is from Jag Fel, the Imperial that Han and Leia's daughter married. I seriously couldn't think of another name, and it seemed to fit. We've been needing a **\*\*\_\*\*Star Wars**\*\*\_\*\* reference anyway.\*\***************

**\*\*I said this at the beginning of the story, but I need to say it again. This story is dedicated to Eva Maverx. Especially now, since she's been listening to me whine every time I've struggled with this story.\*\***

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 13\_

"How much of that chocolate did Cottontail give you?" Jack asked, quirking an eyebrow in amusement as Merida popped another chocolate egg in her mouth. It was something she had been doing regularly since they had left Warren. Not constantly, but regularly.

"It helps calm the mornin' sickness," Merida said. "An' whoever named that was a liar. Seems like the mornin' is the only time I'm \_not\_ sick."

"The baby must not like hazelnut soup," Jack said. He glanced in the direction of what he guessed was the kitchen, judging from the smells coming from that direction.

Merida made what sounded like a grunt of agreement. "It's Rapunzel's favorite, apparently."

Jack nodded.

They sat on the railing of a patio adjacent to the dining room a servant had led them to a few minutes earlier. The royal family had yet to arrive, and the smells that already filled the room were too much for Merida's stomach, so they had decided to wait outside. Not that Jack was complaining.

Even if the cool breeze blowing off the sea didn't speak to him, it was still comfortable.

He looked down at the well-tendered flowers just below the railing, bordering the manicured lawn. Bright yellow lilies "the crest of the royal family.

"Do ya want one?" Merida asked, holding out the small drawstring bag



of foil wrapped chocolates.

"No thanks. Bunny's good at guessing what kind of chocolate each person likes best," Jack said. "I'm guessing you got chile, or fire flowers or something?"

"Something about lava, too," Hiccup chuckled. "I got cinnamon."

"Yeah. So unless he gave you anything mint, I doubt think I'd enjoy it."

Merida looked into her bag of chocolate, as though trying to gather some kind of information out of it. But after a moment she shrugged and pulled out another. "I wonder why royals think they're allowed to keep us common folk waiting."

"We've only been here a couple minutes," Hiccup said. He looked over his wife shoulder and reached into the bag of chocolates, withdrawing one wrapped in red and black foil.

"Don't eat that, it's chile," Merida said, plucking it from his fingers. "And I don't care. I'm hungry."

She unwrapped the chile flavored chocolate and ate it.

"That can't be good for the baby," Hiccup muttered.

Merida rolled her eyes.

Jack leaned back against the wall of the palace, taking a deep breath and letting it out in an attempt to relax. His agitation about the coming dinner was making it hard to sit still, but he didn't have anything to do but listen to Merida and Hiccup banter. He didn't even pay attention to the words, jut their familiar voices.

"Of course, we probably shouldn't mention to their majesties that Jack took a shower with their daughter," Merida said suddenly, a smirk in her voice.

Jack rolled his eyes, without opening them. "It was not a shower. It was a cover up."

"Uh-huh."

"Seriously?" Jack asked, opening one eye to look at them. Hiccup was grinning as well. Traitor. "You're not going to let that rest, are you?"

"Nope. Nor the time I caught ya cuddlin' in the pool."

"She was crying!" Jack said. "And you're not making this easier."

"I'm just doin' what ye do best," Merida shrugged. "Ya know 'have a little fun instead.' Ya ain't said that in a while."

"It's too soon for that," Jack sighed.

"Maybe ye're right," she admitted.

Jack pointed to his own chest, over his heart, reminding her it was his feelings they were talking about " of course she was right.

Before any of them could break the silence that fell over them, it was broken for them when they heard someone coming through the door of the dining room. They couldn't see who was coming in. But exchanging quick glances, they stood and headed back inside (Merida tucking her chocolates into the pocket of her dress).

Jack had to blink, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the sudden lack of light. Despite the chandelier that hung above the long table, reflecting light off the crystals and the highly polished wood table, it was nothing to the bright sunlight outside.

But as soon as he could see clearly again, he wished he couldn't. His throat constricted painfully as he saw Rapunzel being led in by the Imperial Ambassador. Her hair was expertly braided and twisted to be as out of the way as possible, but it still dragged on the floor behind her. A jeweled tiara now rested amidst the braids, and she wore a floor length cream and purple silk dress.

He wasn't sure how much pain his heart could take before it gave out on him. All Toothiana and North's lectures on the resilience of the human spirit were being called into question at the moment, because he wasn't sure how he could survive this, let alone recover from it.

Jack flexed his right hand " not thinking about the wind, but imagining how satisfying it would feel the punch the ambassador. It was the Imperials who had kept her locked in a tower while she was mentally abused, and yet somehow he was allowed to escort her?

"I hope we didn't keep you waiting," King Tomas said, looking between them.

"Not at all," Hiccup said, before Merida had a chance to reply.

Jack couldn't have spoken even if he wanted to.

"I hope your rooms are adequate," Queen Adela said, offering them a warm smile. Her daughter looked just like her, despite the difference in hair color. Like Rapunzel her hair was braided expertly, the way Rapunzel had kept her hair up before Warren, and the ends still only brushed the floor.

Jack started to think again how ridiculous it was, even if it was a sign of nobility (he noticed the men's hair was fairly short), but then remembered he had resolved never to think badly of Rapunzel's hair again " and that extended to her mother, and the rest of her people.

"Absolutely," Hiccup said. "Thank you."

"It's the least we can do," the king said. "After all you've done." He hugged Rapunzel to his side and kissed the top of her head. She giggled in response.

Jack had to look away.

It was her father. So why was the knife twisting again? And what had he done to deserve this fate?

A servant announced that they were ready to serve dinner and they all began to take their seats.

He was seated higher than Hiccup and Merida (apparently someone had actually taken his rank seriously), but still lower than the Imperials (the ambassador and his guard).

He was also several places down from Rapunzel, so he couldn't talk to her, or even really look at her. Maybe he was paranoid, but he wondered if that moment on the landing pad had made her parents wary, or even before they had stepped onto the balcony.

Jack sighed inwardly. He was starting to wish he'd agreed to let Hiccup and Merida cover for him. As it was, he was thinking about excusing himself right then. But it seemed too late, so he took his seat.

He stared down at the place setting in front of him, fingering the handle of the butter knife.

Needing to focus on anything other than the situation, he examined the room, the way Bunnymund and North had taught him.

Eight liveried guards, there as much for appearance as protection he guessed. The ambassador was probably armed, as well as his guard. Three doors: the doors to the balcony, which overlooked the balcony; the door that led to the hallway (and the palace he didn't know the layout of); then a third door, which led to the kitchen, if the servants coming through it with the salad course were any indication.

The salad course was set in front of them, and they all began eating. From the corner of his eye he saw Merida pushing aside a few ingredients with a grimace.

"Governor Frost."

Jack looked up halfway through a bite of salad and over at the ambassador, a couple seats down and across from him (next to Rapunzel â€" which set him on edge). He spared a glare towards Merida when she snorted.

"We weren't properly introduced earlier," the man said.

\_And I don't want to be,\_ Jack thought. The man certainly wasn't getting any points calling him "Governor". Even on Warren no one actually used their titles â€" especially not his. He probably would have laughed as well, if it weren't for his inherent dislike of the man.

"I'm Ambassador Emil Fel."

"Jack Frost," he said. "The 'governor' isn't necessary."

"Actually, we've met before."

"We have?" Jack frowned. He looked more closely at Fel, trying to recall if he had ever seen the man before. He didn't think so. But he was fairly nondescript â€" a few inches taller than Jack (a lot of men were), with dark blond hair and green eyes.

"We were at the Academy together," Fel said.

"Ye knew Frostbite when 'e was at the Academy?" Merida asked â€" with decidedly too much interest in her voice. When he glanced over at the red head, her eyes were darting between him and the Imperial, her grin threatening mischievous.

Jack noticed Rapunzel had looked up as well.

"We weren't friends â€" we never actually met, to be honest" Fel said, looking at Merida. His extreme civility made Jack roll his eyes. "But he's hard to forget, with that hair."

Jack's hand flew to his white hair. He often forgot how unique most people in the galaxy thought it was â€" North and Nightlight both had white hair as well, after all.

"Was 'e really top o' the class?" she asked.

Jack should have known that was what she was looking for. She had always made it clear she doubted he was being honest whenever he bragged about that.

"He was, actually," Fel said, glancing at Jack. "It was extremely frustrating, but that's why I recognized his name while going over the reports about the princess. I can tell you how frustrating it was. I went into the Academy, the son of a high ranking officer, expecting to be top of my class. And yet, every time the scores were posted, J. Frost glared at me from the top spot."

"Told ya," Jack said, offering Merida a halfhearted smirk.

Her lower lip pressed out in a small pout, but she rolled her eyes. "Ya still got kicked out."

"I still graduated," Jack said. "They just didn't make me an officer."

"But you didn't actually attend graduation," Fel said.

"I was off planet by then," Jack said.

"I had planned on introducing myself on graduation," Fel said. "I resented you during training. But once I had my place on my first ship, I found it wasn't as big a deal as I thought. I can't tell you how surprised I was to see you on the security footage from Imperial Tower." He looked at Rapunzel. "But I must admit, your highness, I was not surprised to realize he was the one who managed to bypass the Tower's security to rescue you. Though, considering the Tower is supposed to have some of the best security in the Empire, I have to ask: How did you manage it, Frost?"

Jack took a drink from his glass of water. "Trade secret."

Did Fel actually expect him to tell the truth on that?

"Will you at least tell me how you managed to hide her onboard The Night Fury?" he asked. "According to General Black's report, the search was quite thorough â€" and you were taking a shower?"

Rapunzel let out what sounded like a squeak â€" and everyone looked over to see her blushing furiously, her eyes fixed on the salad she was poking at with her fork.

Jack grimaced, knowing what was about to come. So much for not mentioning that.

When he looked around the table, Hiccup was shaking his head, Merida was smirking, Queen Adela was looking between Jack and her daughter, while the king and prince looked about ready to sign a warrant for his execution.

"I hid her in the shower unit," he said. "The steam from the shower covered her body heat from the sensors."

"And you were in the shower unit with her?" Thomas asked, his voice dark.

Jack rubbed his forehead with his fingertips, wondering if Fel had walked him into this one on purpose â€" as if he needed another reason to dislike the ambassador.

He still knew it was a good idea â€" the best, even if it hadn't been the only one. And it had worked. But when he had been throwing his clothes on the floor, he certainly hadn't imagined he would have to explain it to her parents. And he certainly hadn't expected to have to explain it to the parents of the girl he had fallen in love with.

It had kept her safe, he reminded himself. It was worth whatever King Thomas decided to do to him.

"Yes."

"Daddy," Rapunzel said. All eyes turned on her. "Jack never..." she looked at him, and he knew what she was about to say was, technically, a lie. "He never touched me."

Right. If he had never touched her, she wouldn't be burned onto his lips.

He really wished he hadn't kissed her.

"I was fully dressed," she added.

"And you?" Thomas challenged, looking at Jack.

"I had my boxers on," he said. He kept a hand over his face, trying to hide his burning cheeks.

"Daddy," she said again.

"I woulda killed 'im if 'e did anythin', Ye're Majesty," Merida said.

Jack looked over at her, thanking her with his eyes.

"You tried to anyway," Hiccup chuckled.

Well, if he'd ever hoped maybe he and Rapunzel still has a chance, it was gone now, judging from the look on her father's face.

"So, Ambassador Fel."

Jack looked at Merida, relieved at the change of topic. She was rolling a piece of what looked like dried cranberry between her fingers (the fruit no doubt pulled from her salad), watching Fel with what anyone who knew her would recognize as a thinly veiled glare.

"Yes, Mrs. Haddock?"

It took all Jack's strength not to laugh.

"Merida," she said, scowling. She had picked up a warm roll of bread from a basket on the table and she tore it in half while she spoke. "We haven't heard anythin' 'bout the coup on Pallash. Considerin' we were just on Pallash II, it seems kinda sudden."

"On the outside, perhaps," Fel chuckled. "But it's been in the works for years. Gothel was hardly a responsible ruler, by any stretch of the imagination. The military has been working on a coup that would allow for a seamless take over."

"Eight years?" Jack guessed, taking a roll of bread from a nearby basket on the table.

"Yes, actually," Fel said, blinking.

"Since she cut the military budget," Jack said, tearing the piece of roll in half. Delicate ribbons of steam wafted into the air.

"Uh, yes," Fel said, his smooth tone faltering, at least for a moment.

There was a moment of awkward silence, and exchanged glances, everyone focused on their salads and bread rolls.

"So will it be a military empire?" Hiccup asked, breaking the silence.

Fel shook his head, visibly glad to be once more in control. So he wasn't as smooth, or skilled, as he seemed. Even more than feeling smug about that, Jack filed it away carefully. "No, we feel there's a difference between soldiers and politicians. We just felt that the current regime was no longer in the best interest of the people."

Or in the soldiers' financial interest.

"The coup was led by General Fel â€" my father. He has given up his military rank to become emperor."

Jack, Hiccup and Merida exchanged glances, and he could see in their eyes that the same alarm bells were echoing through all their

minds.

"We're establishing a senate â€" that way every planet will have a representative in all decision making."

"Rapunzel," Augustus said, drawing all attention to the royal family at the head of the table. "The council is considering making you Corona's senate. I know it's not the crown, but it will be of even greater importance, as you'll be impacting galactic politics, rather than just those here at home."

Jack bit his tongue, to keep from either laughing or saying something it most decidedly wasn't his place to say.

Rapunzel's eyes widened, her mouth opening slightly as she glanced between her brother and her parents. Her eyes darted to Jack, then back to her plate. "I-"

"Actually, there's another... proposal, to consider," Fel said.

Jack didn't like the sound of that â€" either the words, or the tone. And the word 'proposal' scraped the inside of his ears until he felt like they would start bleeding.

"I confess, I haven't spoken with your parents about this, but I have spoken with my father â€" and I feel it should be your choice."

"Don' tell me," Merida whispered. And Jack saw her fist tighten on the table.

At least, this time, it wasn't just his mind rushing to the worst case scenarios.

"I propose-" there was that word again, Jack was tempted to check if there was blood coming out of his ears yet "-an alliance between Corona and the New Empire."

"What kind of alliance are you proposing?" Adela asked.

What had he done to deserve this? Really?

"A traditional one, actually," Fel said, with a polite laugh. "A marriage, between her highness and myself. It would-"

Jack couldn't listen.

As he stood up his hand knocked his glass of water off the table, his gauntlet knocking against the crystal with a musical chime. The tumbler fell on its side, water pouring around his plate and utensils, to fall off the edge of the table like a waterfall.

But he didn't notice any of it as he was already at the door, opening it with more force than necessary. He vaguely registered that several people called out his name, and he heard someone get up to follow him. But he slammed the door shut behind him.

He didn't know where he was going, just that he couldn't stop moving. He wanted to fly, to have the wind pick him up and carry him \_anywhere\_. He really didn't care at the moment. But there was no

wind in the hall. And even if there was, it wouldn't have listened to him.

He was about to start running.

"Jack."

Her voice pulled him up short.

"You should go back in," he said, not turning back to look at her.

"No," she said. "Not until you tell me what's wrong."

Jack laughed darkly. "You have to ask."

"I don't mean that," she said. "Why- Jack, I don't understand."

Jack closed his eyes, trying to fight back every instinct that was forcing him to turn around. But when he heard her voice break, he knew he had already lost the fight. His shoulder sagged as he turned to look at her.

"What don't you understand?" he asked. "This is your home, Rapunzel. And I have to go back to Warren. I shouldn't have left again â€" but I promised I would keep you safe until I got you home."

She met his gaze, her eyes once more pleading with him. But he still didn't know what they were pleading for. She took a few cautious steps forward, closer to him.

"I couldn't take it anymore," he whispered.

"What?" she asked. "Did you think I would say yes?"

"I don't know!" he snapped, rubbing his forehead, trying to think. "I told you, I love you! But I-"

He didn't get a chance to finish the sentence (he wasn't sure what he was going to say anyway), because two things happened at once.

The first, was that Rapunzel grabbed the collar of his vest and pulled him down until his lips smashed against hers. And his hands were on her waist before he had a chance to think, closing the distance between their bodies.

The second was that the door of the dining room opened.

"Rapunzel?"

## 14. Chapter 14

**\*\*It's 4:02 in the morning, and this is finally done. I got distracted for a few days making the Among The Stars playlist â€" the link to which is on my profile page if you're interested.\*\***

**\*\*This is the longest chapter yet, just shy 5k words. I feel like there's something else I wanted say â€" but I can't think of anything**



because I'm exhausted. Though there's no cliffhanger this time, I think you guys needed a breather. And this is still an emotional chapter.\*\*

\*\*Several Disney princesses make cameos in this story â€" I hope I didn't overdo it. You'll have to let me know!\*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 14\_

"Jackâ€|" Hiccup sighed, rubbing his face. "What happened to not letting Aster down?"

Jack started to apologize, but found his throat refused to form the words. Or any words, for that matter. It was once more clenched so tight it was a wonder he could still breathe.

"Aw, come on, Hic," Merida said. "They over reacted."

"I know," Hiccup sighed. "But I'm pretty sure it's some kind of social faux pas for a girl â€" a princess â€" to be caught kissing minutes after she was proposed to be another guy."

Jack groaned. That stupid word again. It still grated his every nerve. He grabbed one of the couch throw pillows and covered his face.

Rapunzel's parents had opened the dining room door just in time to watch their daughter crush her lips against his. And though the kiss had lasted only a few brief seconds before King Thomas had said her name, it hadn't felt as innocent as their last kiss, and it had probably looked even worse. They hadn't been pleased â€" and that was putting it lightly.

Merida laughed. "Still. The look on Fel's face was priceless!"

Behind the pillow, Jack felt the corners of his mouth twitch in a grin. Because, disaster though the scene had been, she was right. Fel's wide eyes had darted between them â€" the way Jack's hands still gripped her waist like a life line, and her fingers still clenched around the collar of his vest. The color had drained from the Imperial's face as his jaw tightened.

Jack would be lying if he said it hadn't been satisfying.

"He made such a big deal 'bout yoo bein' his rival at the Academy, and now ya get the girl, too."

"I didn't 'get the girl' though," Jack reminded, lifting the pillow away from his mouth so his words wouldn't be muffled.

"Ye got her heart," Merida said. "That's the part that matters."

Jack let the pillow fall back into place.

He and Rapunzel had jerked apart when they heard her father say her name. Jack had felt his heart sink when he saw the shocked horror on

the king's face.

No one had said anything for several minutes, and he had felt her fingers tighten around his collars. His hands had slowly lowered from her waist, but the purple satin was hopelessly wrinkled and creased from his grip.

Queen Adela was the first to find her voice. "Rapunzel, I- I think you should go to your room."

Rapunzel's eyes hand closed, her fingers finally letting go of his vest. But not before he saw her pained expression. It just drove the knife deeper into his chest.

"We should too," Hiccup had said, and the three had left the hallway before anyone had a chance to object.

Which was why they were now in the common room of the suite, Jack's vest tossed into a corner while he lay on one of the couches. He would had enjoyed being free of the constricting leather. But with the pain in his chest, he barely noticed the difference.

"An' I'm still hungry," Merida muttered. "He could have waited until desert, at least." She was eating chocolate again, probably since they didn't really have anything else.

"Sorry," Jack said.

"Not your fault." From her tone he guessed she had shrugged. "Though we should probably get off world before the king decides kissin' his daughter's a punishable offense."

"Or before Fel decides the whole thing was a personal insult," Hiccup said. "The New Empire isn't even a week old, and I don't feel like getting on the crown prince's bad side already."

Jack agreedâ€| but found the thought of returning to Warren didn't leave him as relieved as he would have expected. Instead his stomach twisted. His eyes opened, though with the pillow still over his face all he could see was black.

He wanted to go back, but he couldn't. Not yet.

"Of course, this is us we're talkin' 'boot," Merida said. "Seems kinda inevitable."

Jack snorted behind the pillow. "Too true."

"You guys think I'm kidding," Hiccup shook his head.

Lifting the pillow, he sat up just enough to look over the back of the couch, out the window. The sun was just setting below the horizon, leaving the sky clear and black. He thought for a moment â€" probably not long enough â€" before tolling off the couch and to his feet.

"We can't leave yet."

"Oh no," Hiccup said, shaking his head. "Wha- No. No! What do you think you're doing?"

"I have to talk to her," Jack said. Going into his bedroom, he tugged off the formal shirt he'd worn to the failed dinner.

"What happened to not failing Aster again?" Hiccup asked.

"I already did," Jack reminded. He tugged on his hoodie as he returned to the common room.

"If they catch you, Thomas having you executed probably won't be a joke anymore!" Hiccup said. "Especially if you're \_in her room\_!"

"And at the moment, I'm having a hard time caring," Jack shrugged. "The way my heart hurts, it feels like I'll die without her anyway. I have to at least talk to her."

Hiccup looked at Merida. "Help me out here?"

Merida gave her husband an apologetic look.

She was on Jack's side.

Jack sat back down on the couch to pull on the boots he had kicked off earlier. But as he reached for the boots, there was a knock on the door of the common room.

All three of them froze.

"Dat da dah, we're dead," Hiccup muttered in an almost sing-song voice, shaking his head.

They exchanged wary glances before Hiccup called "come in."

Jack stood up, braced for whatever would come next â€" trying to keep his breathing steady.

The door was opened by a liveried guard, who bowed as he held it open for King Thomas.

Jack swallowed.

Thomas entered the room wordlessly, his eyes focused on Jack without giving Hiccup or Merida a glance.

Hiccup's words echoed in Jack's ears. And despite what he'd said, he realized he really wasn't ready to die. Not by a long shot.

"Frost, I'd like to speak with you," he said quietly.

Hiccup and Merida looked to Jack, waiting for his signal. They were behind him whatever he chose, and that meant the universe to him.

"It's okay," he said.

They nodded in response and went into their own room, but not without concerned glances back over their shoulders just before the door closed behind Hiccup.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Thomas sighed. It was a heavy sound, as though the weight of a world rested on his shoulder. And in a way it did, Jack realized. When he looked at the man, he saw the fine lines of exhaustion around his eyes, and he looked at Jack with a mix of exhausted frustration.

"Do you realize what you've done?" Thomas asked. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Jack looked away from the accusation in the king's hazel eyes.

"You saved my daughter, and you brought her home, and for that I'm grateful â€" more so than I can say. We had almost given up hope of seeing her again.

"But this â€" \_this\_ â€" " He shook his head. "I'm not sure what's worse: what you've done to my daughter, or the danger you've put this planet in."

Jack balked at the first, trying to figure out what he had "done" to Rapunzel. He had initiated their first kiss back in the ice palace, but she had initiated their second. He was fairly sure that was beyond debate.

Then the second accusation hit.

"What?"

"The New Empire is barely a week old," Thomas sighed. "I saw you and your friends when Fel told you the situation. It's the same regimen with a new name and ruler. Fel is here to gage our loyalty, not because they truly care about making amends. And my planet cannot afford for them to renew the blockade â€" or worse yet, launch a full on attack."

"So his proposal was about making her a hostage again," Jack said. It wasn't a guess. Much as he disliked politics, he understood them. All too well.

Thomas frowned.

Jack's eyes narrowed as he looked at the king's averted gaze. "You would allow that?"

"I have a world to think of, Frost," he said. "As a father, no. But as a king, I have five billion people who depend on me. I don't expect someone so young to understand that â€" to understand that kind of responsibility."

Jack tried to bite back his retort. But he had spent five years running from responsibility. Less than two days back on Warren didn't change that. But his tongue jerked from of his teeth, and the words came out.

"Rapunzel's younger than I am," he said. "She understands. It's why she blames herself for what happened â€" she cared more about what was happening to her people than her own execution."

"Rapunzel was raised for the throne â€" she has to understand."

"And yet you took that away from her," Jack said, before he could think to bite it back. "You let the council pressure you to make Augustus your heir â€" all before come spoiled brat was upset he couldn't use her to become the next king."

Thomas glared at him.

In the pocket of his hoodie Jack's fists clenched, the ligaments stretching until they hurt. But he couldn't regret it. He probably should. But he didn't.

"Rapunzel's position aside," the king said. "I now find myself scrambling to try and smooth over this disaster before Fel decides this is enough of an affront to make us his enemies. And groveling to a man like Fel is not something I enjoy.

"And my daughter." Thomas shook his head.

Jack wanted to ask "what about her?" â€" but decided that wasn't in the best interest of his health.

But the silence stretched on, and it loosened his tongue until the words came out without him thinking.

"She kissed me."

Wrong thing to say, judging from the way Thomas's face darkened.

He might have imagined it, but he thought he heard what might have been Merida hitting her forehead against the door â€" he had no doubt they were listening in.

Yeah, it was a stupid thing to say, now that he gave it a half second's thought. Why was he so baf with words?

Thomas's jaw tightened, and Jack fought the urge to take a cautious step back. But he was still standing in front of the couch, so that was impossible.

Several more tense moments passed before Thomas spoke, his voice low and dangerous. "Was that the first time you've kissed her."

Jack's eyes shifted to the side, betraying him even if he hadn't known he had to tell the truth. "No."

"Inâ€" " The king's voice broke. "In theâ€" "

"No," Jack said, before the sentence was finished. He knew Thomas was about to ask if it had been in the shower unit. "No. But I would to point out that hiding her there \_worked\_ â€" something everyone forgets when giving me a hard time for it. Do you know how many people manage to hide \_anything\_ â€" let alone a living, breaking person â€" from a full Imperial search? Without being specially equipped?"

Still not the right thing to say, apparently.

This was why Hiccup was their spokesman. He really shouldn't be trusted with important conversations. There was a reason why Tsar Lunar had made him Governor of a territory where almost no one lived

â€" so he wouldn't have to deal with bureaucracy. (It was Jack's theory, at least. The Man in the Moon wasn't in the habit of disclosing any aspects of his decision making to anyone â€" and especially not to Jack.)

Thomas continued to glower at him.

He was dealing with a protective father already struggling with galactic politions.

"We kissed one other time," Jack said, hoping it would convince the man that he hadn't taken advantage of his daughter. "In the ice palace on Warren â€" just before we found out Gothel was dead. And we've hugged a couple times."

Many times, actually, now he thought about it. But they had all been platonic. Even when he had been shirtless â€" because he'd been swimming. Still, best not to mention that. He remembered Merida's reaction too well.

"Do you think that makes it right?"

"I love her!"

#

The silence was maddening.

There was too much space in his head, too many thoughts. And there was nothing in the guest room to distract him.

On the nightstand the chrono told him it was already the second hour. But he didn't bother turning out the lamp, let alone trying to sleep. He was mentally and physically exhausted, but there was no way he would be able to sleep with all his churning thoughts. And while the knife in his chest had stopped twisting, the pain remained in the form of a dull, steady ache.

Where were Sandy and his dream sand when he needed them?

Jack closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the headboard.

There was a soft knock on his door, but he didn't bother to open his eyes as he called for whoever it was to come in.

The door opened with almost no sound, and he slowly opened his eyes and turned his head toward the door. He watched Rapunzel close it behind her with a soft click (making sure all her hair was in the room), before she turned to face him, hugging herself.

The fear in her green eyes drove the knife a little deeper into his chest and twisted it viciously. But that wasn't why he hated that fear.

He still didn't know what to say (and was starting to think he never would), but he held out an arm, beckoning her closer.

Even across the ten feet or so between them he saw the tears well up in her eyes just before she ran to him, throwing herself on the bed

and against his chest.

The last time he had seen her cry, in the shower unit, he had assured her everything would be all right, that he would keep her safe. But saying so now would have felt like a lie, because he didn't know. He couldn't see how everything would be all right. Not after the look her father had given him when he had admitted he was in love with her. Not when the phantom pain in his chest felt as though it would rip him apart.

He couldn't make promises.

So he wrapped his arms around her trembling shoulders and held her against his bare chest.

He clamped his own eyes shut, fighting back his own tears. But he felt one slip past all his defense, burning its way down his cheek.

"I'm so sorry, Jack," she whispered.

"Hey, hey." He pulled back a little, lifting her chin so their eyes met. "What are you sorry for?"

"Putting you through all this." She averted her gaze. "My father, Felâ€¦ I'm not worth this."

"Rapunzel, look at me," he said. His breath caught in his throat when their eyes met again. With his thumb he brushed away the tear rolling down her cheek.

Couldn't he do anything right? He wondered. Somehow, the blame for this belonged on his shoulders, he knew. After everything she had been through in the Tower, she didn't deserve this.

"You have no idea," he whispered, when she finally complied and met his gaze. "You have no idea what you've done for me. I've been running for nearly five years. In all that time, you were the only thing that got me to go home. You're the reason I accepted my responsibility as a Governor. You made it possible for Hiccup and Merida to have a home world to raise their child on.

"It doesn't make it hurt any less, believe me. But I'm so grateful to you." He sighed. "I just wish you weren't hurting. I could handle this pain if you could be happy. I would do anything to ease your pain."

Rapunzel shook her head. "The council is already pressuring me to accept Fel's proposal."

"Pressuring," he muttered. "Seems like they're good at that." His arms tightened around her shoulders.

"It's not fair!" she cried. "I love you. Why can't they accept that?"

"I don't know."

Heavy silence fell over them, and Jack took what solace he could from the feeling of holding her. When she exhaled he could feel her warm

breath on his chest. He closed his eyes, trying to forget the galaxy and just enjoy the few moments he had with her.

He felt her touch the skin under his heart.

"There's not even a mark," she murmured.

"I have you to thank for that." He kissed the top of her head.

For this moment, they would be normal, and forget that there was an entire government (if not a galactic empire) trying to tear them apart.

Her fingers moved to trace a line on his forearm. "You have so many scars."

He looked at his forearm and saw she was tracing a scar that ran from his elbow almost to his wrist.

"Not that many, actually," he said. "Hiccup has more. His left foot is a prosthetic."

She looked up. "Really?"

He nodded.

Rapunzel returned her attention to his arm. "How did you get this?"

"It was really stupid, actually," he admitted. "I was sparring with Nightlight when I was sixteen. Somehow we both stepped wrong, and the crystal dagger on his staff caught my arm." He touched the end of the scar closest to his wrist, and followed it up to the elbow, the same way the dagger had traveled through his skin. "It was pretty deep, and Tooth chewed us both out."

He glanced on the other scars on both his arms. "Turns out I have a weakness when it comes to protecting my arms. Which is probably the stupidest weakness I've ever heard of."

Rapunzel giggled, and the sound was like a balm on his heart.

Jack grinned and adjusted his position carefully, needing to sit up straighter, but not wanting her to leave his lap.

But she was already sitting back, looking at his chest and arms in the low light of the lamp on the bedside table. The corner of his lips tugged in a smirk when he saw she wasn't blushing (and she usually did when he was shirtless), but was instead examining him.

"What about this one?" she touched a faint scar on his upper right arm.

"We were on a planet called Atlantica."

"I've heard of it," she nodded.

"It's only about twenty one parsecs from here," he said. "Ninety percent of the planet's surface is covered in water, and it's home to



some of the scariest creatures I've ever seen. One of the mermaids " I think her name was Ariel " decided she wanted to stay on land when she fell in love with a human. The problem was, she ran away without telling her father " who happened to be king of the sea. Relations between the merfolk and humans is tense to say the least, so when he found out she was on land, he assumed the humans had kidnapped her, and he declared all out war.

"We were unlucky enough to land on Atlantica to refuel. Long store short, I never want to fight another sea monster as long as I live. We all smelled like dead fish for days, and I had to throw away my favorite jacket because I couldn't get the smell out.

"But that" he glanced at the scare "was from a porcelain doll. Ariel was a total klutz, and extremely excitable. She tripped over a table leg in one of the shops. I managed to catch her, but somehow cut my arm when the doll on the table broke.

"It shouldn't have scarred, but it got infected in the battle. Plus, I snagged my leg on one of the monsters' fangs, so I have a scar on the my left calf too."

"Can I see?"

Jack rolled up the left leg of his pajama pants up to his knee, and twisted his leg to show her the scar on his calf.

She ran her eyes and fingers over it. "Was it deep?"

He nodded. "I passed out from blood loss."

Her head tilted to the side, and he followed her gaze to the inside of his ankle, where a thin scar ran over the protruding bone.

"That one is from the academy," he said. "I was working on my ship after a disaster of a training exercise. I really don't work well in a team. I was in the cockpit running the engine diagnostic. There was a stray wire I knew I should have taken care of earlier. And if I'd had my boots on it wouldn't have reached the skin. North has a rule that I have to wear shoes when I'm working on any ship. But at that time I was still mad at everyone on Warren, and I left them off on purpose."

"I'm guessing you learned that lesson?" she asked with a small giggle.

"Painfully." He chuckled.

"What about this one?" She touched a line on the back of his left hand as he unrolled his pant leg.

Jack looked down at the line that ran parallel to his knuckles, frowning at it as he had many times. "I don't remember. I've had it since I woke up on Warren. I remember bits and pieces of Burgess, but not that." He grimaced. "Probably something stupid, like most of them."

Before he could dwell on his lost memories, Rapunzel took his hand and kissed the scar.

He smiled at her, grateful for being saved before he could go too far into questions that had no answers. Even Toothiana hadn't been able to help him recover the memories. He had accepted they were gone. But the questions remained to plague him.

She touched one on his left arm, a few inches above his wrist on the outside.

"That is from an extremely vicious rose bush," he said. "I don't remember where we were, but these three old women asked us to rescue the foundling girl they had adopted â€" she was like seven, I think. I remember her name was Briar Rose because the woman who kidnapped her had a hedge of rose bushes we had to get through. The women wouldn't tell us why she was kidnapped, though. "

He twisted his arm to show her the one over his left elbow. "This one is from a spar at the Academy."

"This one?" she traced a scar over his left tricep, which wouldn't have been visible if he hadn't twisted his arm.

"I forgot about that one." He twisted his arm and craned neck simultaneously to try and get a good look at it. "I do have a lot of scars. And most of them because of girls. That one is because of a girl named Snow White. Very sweet, but with a bad habit of falling off things. And taking gifts from strangers. Keeping her alive felt down right impossible some times.

"She was heir to the throne of a small kingdom on Apfel. But after her father died, her stepmother tried to kill her to take power. We were hired to keep her safe until the queen was deposed. That was about the time I started wondering how we went from being a ship for hire to being bounty hunters. She ended up marrying a prince from a neighboring kingdom who helped over throw her stepmother.

"But not before she fell off a rock ledge. Near the cabin we were hiding in. I caught her but was knocked off balance and got this from a jutting rock. Like I said, most of these are really stupid. I wish I had more that actually had to do with fighting."

She giggled, then reached up to trace a scar that ran upward from the arch of his right eyebrow. "I've wanted to ask about this one since we met."

"We were on Agraba," he said. "A business man was having trouble with space pirates attacking his freighters, and bandits attacking his caravans from the docking bay to his factories. He asked us to bring him a shipment from Morae. When we got there, he asked us to guard the convoy to his factory. We were attacked by bandits on the way. It's really stupid because this is from one of Merida's throwing knives. She was aiming for a bandit behind me, but I didn't duck fast enough."

Rapunzel giggled again. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm the one with the pathetic scars."

"What about this one?"

Jack's breath hitched as her fingers brushed the scar on his lower

stomach, an inch or so above the waistband of his pants.

"That-" he had to clear his throat. "We were on China to refuel. There was a victory party in the capital city because they thought they had just won a war. But there was a girl named Mulan who claimed the Huns were in the city. No one would listen to her, but we did so we got dragged into the fight. I ended up wrestling with a Hun who pulled a vibroblade on me. I jerked back and we both tumbled off the roof. I managed to catch a jutting beam â€" he didn't. Luckily Merida got me down before I passed out.

"That's all of them."

"It seems as though you have a scar for every girl you've helped," Rapunzel said, her voice quiet.

"Not all, but most." He frowned. "I never realized that until now."

She touched the smooth skin under his heart, where Black's blaster bolt had hit him.

"But not me," she whispered.

"You say that like it's a bad thing." He tilted his head, trying to see her expression when she looked away from him.

"Rapunzel." He touched her cheek, coaxing her to look at him.

Her eyes were bright in the dim light, and her shoulders began to shake again. She worried her lip between her teeth.

"What's wrong?"

"I- I just don't want you to forget me," she whispered. "I'm glad I save you â€" I'm glad I could! I justâ€"

Jack leaned forward to rest his forehead against hers. "No matter what happens, I could never forget you."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because you have scared me," he said. "You scarred my heart. I can forget the marks on my skin. But I can't forget the one on my heart."

The last word almost vanished as their lips met (he wasn't sure who initiated this time), her arms wrapped around his neck.

He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her as close as possible â€" and wishing they could be closer still. If she way her fingers threaded into his hair, and she pressed her mouth harder against his was any indication, she felt the same way.

At some point, he could no longer tell if the heartbeat pounding in his ears was his or hers. Or where his lips ended and hers began.

When they finally parted, breathless, it was of their own choice â€" not because they were interrupted again. Though he wouldn't mind

kissing her again. He wasn't sure he ever wanted to stop â€" but also knew he had to. He needed a minute to breathe in order to maintain his own control.

"Whatever happens, I love you," he said, stroking her cheek. "I would rather die tomorrow than live a life where I never met you."

She buried her face in the crook of his neck, still holding onto him with all her strength. "Don't make me leave yet," she whispered.

"If they find you hereâ€" "

"Please."

Jack sighed and hugged her tighter, kissing her forehead. He lifted her carefully, adjusting his position so he could lay down, her head resting on his chest.

He reached over and turned off the lamp on the nightstand.

They were quiet for a moment, before she spoke.

"Jack?"

His eyes flickered open, though he hadn't realized they had closed. "Yeah?"

"Ifâ€" " in the moonlight he saw her bite her lip. "If things were different â€" if we couldâ€" would youâ€" " She let out a sigh and turned her face into his chest.

She said something, but it was muffled against his skin.

"Would I what?"

She lifted her head slowly. "Would you marry me? I mean, would you-"

He lifted his head to kiss her again.

"In a heartbeat," he whispered, when he pulled back.

"Thank you," she said, returning her head to his chest.

After a few minutes he heard her breathing turn shallow.

He ran a hand over her hair, and she smiled in her sleeping, shifting closer to him.

Why couldn't he have this? He wondered. Why couldn't he fall asleep beside her every night, and wake up next to her every morning? Why were they left with whispers in the dark at three in the morning?

## 15. Chapter 15

**\*\*Author's note goes here. We'll see if it happens. XD\*\***

\_Among The Stars\_

## \_Chapter 15\_

Jack's eyes snapped open up with every nerve screaming at him that something was wrong. The same feeling that had told him to get off Krash the week before.

He lay on his side, facing Rapunzel, one arm draped around her waist to keep her close even in sleep. She was still sound asleep.

It was a sign of their mutual exhaustion that the sun was up, streaming through the window. It illuminated her, and the room, in a soft golden glow. She was beautiful, and the sight of her took his breath away. But the foreboding at the back of his mind wouldn't allow him even a moment to appreciate the sight.

He was still reluctant as he touched her cheek. He could feel that they were running out of time, but he still couldn't bear to interrupt whatever dream caused her to smile in her sleep.

"Rapunzel," he whispered. He ran the back of his knuckled down her cheek lightly.

She hummed softly, curling closer to him.

He repeated her name again, leaning down to kiss her forehead. There was a normalcy to the whole situation. He couldn't shake the feeling that this was supposed to be their normal. That he should be able to wake up next to her every morning. Or at least, he had the desire for it to be so.

If only he didn't feel as though they were about to run for their lives. Again.

"You need to wake up."

Her eyes finally opened slowly, out of focus for a moment before she looked at him, then toward the room. "Jack?"

"You need to get to your own room before-"

But the feeling in the back of his mind ratcheted up, and he knew it was already too late even before he heard the door of the common room slam open.

"Where is she?"

Rapunzel's eyes widened in horror at her father's raised voice. Through the door they could hear Merida say something to the king, though they couldn't make out the words.

Jack spared a moment to feel a surge of pride at how fast Rapunzel reacted, rolling out of bed, adjusting her dark pink nightgown to make sure she was decent. (As decent as she could in a flimsy silk garment that didn't even skim her mid-thigh, at least.) He followed her out of bed, diving in search of the hoodie he had thrown aside in frustration the night before.

He shrugged into it, and Rapunzel pushed the strap of her nightgown

back up onto his shoulder just before the door was thrown open.

Jack was relieved there was a good five feet between them. Right now, being close to her wasn't the best way to keep her safe.

Safe. Right. Because he had been doing such a good job of that lately.

Thomas stood in the doorway, looking between them, Jack with his hands in his hoodie, Rapunzel hugging herself as she looked down at the white carpet. His face bore all the fury Jack had expected, and after a moment he had to look away from the king's gaze.

He couldn't even blame him. He had known he shouldn't fall asleep â€" that he shouldn't have let her stay. And if it was his daughter, he knew he probably would have been out for blood.

But after a moment of silence, he looked up. Thomas was watching Rapunzel, who worried her lower lip while her eyes remained fixed on the floor. His expression was no longer angry, though. Rather, he looked hurt.

When he spoke, his voice was quiet and sad. "Your mother is looking for you, Rapunzel."

She finally lifted her eyes, looking first to her father, then to Jack.

He nodded, silently trying to assure her he would be all right. (Hopefully he would be.)

When their gazes met, he saw in her eyes that they were both aware this was probably goodbye.

His heart clenched painfully and the knife sank a little deeper.

This wasn't how he had wanted to say goodbye â€" let alone how he had expected it to be. He didn't want to say goodbye at all. But if he had to, this wasn't how he wanted it to be.

Once more he was at a loss for words, but he knew he wanted to say something.

Rapunzel let out a trembling breath, and then he saw her swallow and square her shoulders.

\_That's my girl,\_ he thought sadly, thought there was an undeniable flash of pride at her strength.

"Yes sir," she said.

Her father nodded, and held the door open for her.

Jack looked away, unable to watch her leave. But he looked up when he saw her approach him out of the corner of his eye, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

He didn't bother glancing at her father as he slid his hands from the pocket of his hoodie to wrap them around her waist, pulling her as

close as physics allowed. He bent his head to rest it in the crook of her neck, taking one last breath of her floral and sunlight scent.

"Never doubt that you're good enough, Rapunzel," he whispered. "I wouldn't take back a moment."

"Never doubt that I love you," she whispered in response. He felt her take a shuddering breath. "N-no matter what happens."

He knew what she meant.

And it made him sick to his stomach.

But when she pulled back, he only nodded. Their eyes met, and he couldn't look away. Rapunzel lifted a hand to touch his cheek. And he realized this was probably the most they could have ever expected.

"I love you," he whispered.

She smiled, tears welling in her eyes.

Thomas cleared his throat. "Rapunzel."

Jack blinked, realizing he had forgotten the man was in the room.

Rapunzel turned toward the door. Their hands lingered as long as possible, until she stepped beyond the reach of their fingertips.

In the doorway she paused to look back, her eyes once more pleading. Jack touched his chest, over his heart, reminding her of what he had said the night before, about the scar she had left on his heart. At the moment, it was all he could give her.

And her expression told him that was enough.

He waited until he heard the door of the suite common room close behind them before he left his room.

The moment he was through the door a mind green pillow from one of the couches collided with his face and chest.

"Are ye outta yer bloody mind?"

Jack caught the pillow before it could fall to the floor. "Apparently. Exhaustion didn't help."

Another pillow collided with his face. Deadly aim was one of Merida's greatest strengths. He dropped the first pillow, and just let the second one fall to the ground.

"Do ye have any idea what y've \_done\_?"

"People are asking me that a lot lately."

Another pillow.

"We didn't do anything."

"I know. If ye did, Hiccup'd kill ya."

"Wait â€" Hiccup?" Jack quirked an eyebrow. Situation aside, he couldn't help being amused at the change.

"Why me?" Hiccup asked. He appeared to be staying out of the way as much as possible. If Jack were smart, he would have done the same thing.

"I'm pregnant," she said, as though that explained everything. And he supposed it did.

He waited a moment; to be sure no more pillows came his way. When they didn't, he picked up the ones on the floor and headed toward the second couch.

"I didn't mean to fall asleep," he sighed. He throw the pillows down. "I justâ€|"

"Ye know it's probably all over the palace now," Merida said. "\_I know you're noble enough t' just sleep beside her â€" but the servants ain't gonna know that. An' one of de only absolutes in the universe is that servants talk. Her reputation's now shot!"

Jack pushed his bangs out of his face, expelling all the air from his lungs.

The three were silent for several long moments, Jack covering his face with his hands while he tried to sort out his own thoughts. But those were interrupted when another pillow collided with his head.

"Ow!" he picked up the pillow to throw it back at her. But frowned when the remembered (thanks in part to Hiccup's glare.) "If you weren't pregnantâ€|."

She just snickered.

"The question is â€" what do we do now?" Hiccup asked, looking between them.

Merida's smirk dropped.

They both looked at Jack expectantly.

"Why are you looking at me?" Jack asked. "I think I've proved I'm incapable of making executive decisions."

"While ye certainly have a point," Merida said. "But we're also your family, so we're on your side whatever you want to do next."

Jack stared at them for a moment.

Finally he shook his head. "Maybe we should just leave â€" head back to Warren."

"You sure?" Hiccup asked.

"Ye're willin' t' leave it like this?"



"Judging by the look her father gave me, I'm not sure I have much choice."

Hiccup chuckled. "When has that ever stopped us?"

"Iâ€" Jack ran a hand through his hair, trying to calculate â€" though he knew he wasn't doing a very good job of it. After a moment he turned to Merida. "You know more about these things that I do, Princess."

Merida shook her head. "It's up t' yoo."

#

Jack really did not like being inside for extended periods of time. And all his conflicted emotions made his pent up energy that much worse, and eventually it drove him out of the suite.

He was surprised the guards didn't stop him as he passed through a side door of the palace, out into the gardens. They didn't stop him â€" but he didn't miss the sidelong glances they, and the servants, shot his way. And he heard their whispers. Word had spread faster than he's expected â€" especially since half of them probably hadn't even seen him the day before. By the time he found a door leading to the gardens, it was a relief to get away from them and out into the fresh air.

The breeze was silent, but still a comfort as it ruffled his hair, brushing his bangs away from his eyes. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the sea and floral scented air.

He looked around to get his bearings, making not of the landmarks he could use to remember which door he had come through. The bottom of the stairs connected to a sand and gravel walking path that made its way deeper into the garden with soft, lazy curves.

With one more deep breath, he started to run.

He had learned a long time ago that even light speed wasn't fast enough to run away from his problems.

But if he ran hard enough and fast enough, feet pounding the ground, lungs burning, heart pumping, blood rushing in his ears, he could leave them behind for a little while.

Only running worked, though.

So for now, he just ran.

The path was designed for casual strolls, so it rambled its way with ease, past rose bushes and lilies, through flowering and fruit bearing trees.

It was similar to the garden in Pallash II where Rapunzel had hidden after he got her out of the Tower â€" though less convoluted.

His mind's eye called back the memory of that night. Of Rapunzel sitting in the pear tree, framed by the last few rays of the setting sun, which seemed to linger above the horizon just a little longer

just to stay in her presence.

He remembered her small waist in his hands as he had helped her down from the fruit laden branches.

If he had knownâ€¦

But he didn't want to think about it. Not right now.

So he pushed a little faster, feet hitting the packed sand and gravel a little harder.

He focused on his breathing. In through the nose, out through the mouth â€” the way Bunnymund had taught him.

Two women were walking on the path, but he didn't slow down. He didn't have the chance to think of saying anything. Instead he swerved onto the grass on the right side to pass them. They exclaimed in surprise â€” but he kept running.

The path bent around the edge of a manmade pond a little further ahead. He barely registered the flowering lily pads in the shallows, and the pair of swans in the deeper waters.

His leg muscles were starting to protest the work he was demanding from them. He would have to stop soon â€” sooner than he wanted. But he would push himself a little further. He refused to slow down though, for fear of his thoughts catching up with him.

A little further.

A burning sensation was starting on the edges of his lung.

A little further.

He was about to stop as he rounded another bend, aware he still needed to walk several miles back to the suite. But he caught sight of an Imperial uniform and grimaced.

A little further.

Fel and his guard stood on the lawn, clearly in discussion. About what, Jack couldn't have cared less. He bent his head and pushed a little faster.

"Frost!"

He stopped, a few feet beyond their position, almost against his own will. Defiantly against his better judgment. Not that he'd paid much attention to that lately. Why start now?

His shoulders rose and fell with the rapid expansion and contraction of his lungs as they worked to keep his rushing blood supplied with fresh oxygen, and quell the burn he had spread to most of the twin organs.

He could feel the t-shirt under his hoodie cling to his back and chest with sweat.

He didn't respond, not turning back, waiting for Fel to say whatever

was on his mind. Courtesy to the Imperial wasn't high on his list of priorities at the moment. After a couple more breaths, (they were starting to even out), he slowly turned to face the ambassador, who had come toward him across the lawn.

"You had an interesting night, from what I hear," Fel said.

Jack looked away with a half shrug. It was a move that had never failed to infuriate nearly every one of his instructors " on Warren and at the Academy. It sent Bunnymund into conniptions. Only North was unaffected by it " he said because he had done the same thing in his own youth.

But Fel wasn't North " he didn't even have Bunnymund's discipline. So, just as Jack predicted, from the corner of his eye he saw Fel's calm façade slip, fury turning his features ugly.

"Did you think shaming her would be enough to make me change my mind?"

Jack kept his expression schooled, eyes fixed on a point beyond Fel's shoulder. When his hand twitched to punch the man, he instead wiped the sweat from his face before it could reach his eyes.

Fel took a step forward.

Jack barely bit back a grimace as he started to take a half step back. Before he could, Fel grabbed the collar of his hoodie.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself, Jack, but it won't happen again," he hissed.

Jack had barely been able to hold himself back when Fel grabbed his hoodie. Now his control broke. (Control never had been one of his strengths.)

With his right hand he grabbed the man's wrist and twisted until the fingers were forced to release. At the same time he drove his left fist hard into Fel's solar plexus. Jack heard him gasp as the blow caused his diaphragm to spasm.

"Hit hard and fast in the right places," Bunnymund had taught him. "Getting your opponent out of the way is more important than looking impressive."

Fel stumbled backwards, gasping for breath.

"Why do you care?" Jack asked. "Why do you want her?"

The Imperial didn't answer, but stumbled forward to attack.

Jack grimaced. Great. He had not set out to get in a fight with the Imperial ambassador. He had thrown the first punch on instinct.

"Thinking with his fists," as Katherine had once said while she and Tooth had tended to his and Nightlight's bruises after they had gotten into a fight with some of the other boys.

He dodged Fel's first, and took a step back, hesitant to fight

back.

But in doing so he gave Fel space to catch his breath and prepare before his next attack. And, for a moment, Jack realized he had forgotten that Fel had trained in hand to hand combat at the Academy, and that course hadn't been lacking â€" he was facing a soldier.

He grimaced as he remembered that with the precision of Fel's next blow.

Jack threw a punch with his left hand. Fel blocked. But Jack swung his right arm a second later and it landed hard on Fel's shoulder.

The Imperial dropped in a sweeping kick in an attempt to trip him up. But Jack jumped over Fel's leg. As soon as he was back on the ground, his right foot snapped up to collide with Fel's ribs before the Imperial had a chance to stand up.

Fel grimaced and growled, faltering to his feet. He was still unsteady, but threw a punch at Jack's face, before Jack had fully regained balance from his last kick. He tried to dodge, but Fel's knuckles still collided with his mouth.

He stumbled backwards, getting space to regain balance and bearing. He tasted copper. When he touched his knuckles to his mouth, they came away smeared with red. Not much, but still there.

Fel attacked again, coming at Jack from the side.

Jack spun on his heel, adjusting his position to slam his elbow into Fel's solar plexus again, before his opponent could land a blow. He didn't back down, shifting his arm to slam the side of his hand just below Fel's eye.

The two men glowered at each other, adjusting their stances, waiting for the other to close the space between them. The skin under Fel's left eye was already beginning to swell. Jack wiped blood from his chin.

His leg muscles reminded him that they had already been worked. This fight couldn't go on long.

Before he could decide whether to wait or attack, a sound reached him, growing stronger and closer with each moment.

A ship engine â€" a distinct one. Smooth and well maintained, but still loud.

Jack risked taking his eyes off Fel to look up in disbelief at the ship flying over the palace ground, towards the royal landing pad. His jaw went slack as he took in the familiar bronze finished ship, with red detailing.

"You gotta be kidding me," he whispered, his hands lowering in shock.

"Sir!"

Jack and Fel both looked over at the Imperial guard who was running

back toward them, eyes wide in what looked like horror as he reached the ambassador.

"Sir, an emissary from Warren is arriving. The royal family is going to meet them now."

## 16. Chapter 16

\*\*Okay, so apparently there's no such thing as "bronze finished chrome" â€" but I can't think of another way to describe it so I'm just gonna use it. If you're wondering, it's really shiny metal with a bronze sheen. \*\*

\*\*This is the last chapter of the Corona Arc â€" but not the end of the story! It looks as though there will be another arc.  
XD\*\*

\*\*Meanwhile, enjoy!\*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 16\_

Of the ten people on the landing pad, Rapunzel was the only one who didn't glare at him as he jogged up. Her expression was one of concern. He couldn't bring himself to look at her, and he didn't bother with the rest of them. Whatever scandal he had caused, as an (unofficial) emissary of Warren, he had as much right to be there as everyone else.

Though the black eye forming on Fel, and his own split lip, might have been what caused the disapproval.

He turned his attention to \_The Sleigh\_ as it came in to an expert landing, bronze finished chrome almost blinding in the bright afternoon sunlight.

The silhouette had changed since the last time he had seen it five years earlier â€" no surprise since North was always fiddling with it. But the ship was still distinct, even if Fel's aide hadn't already confirmed that it was from Warren.

But he was trying to figure out \_why\_ it was there. North had left Warren a few hours before \_The Night Fury\_ with General Black. The New Empire had requested Black be returned to them for trial. Bunnymund had been reluctant to hand over a prisoner he regarded as his own, but had agreed.

Two of North's ELF fighters landed on either side of the ship, their sleek bodies dark scarlet with bronze chrome detailing.

\_The Sleigh\_'s landing gear hissed as they took the ship's full weight when the sublight engines powered down. The loading ramp lowered with the smooth whir of mechanics. And though Jack had known North was onboard, he was still stunned as his mentor came down the ramp. His sword were absent, but even in just a scarlet shirt and dark grey slacks, the large man was no less intimidating.

He watched from the edge of the landing pad while North greeted the

royal family with a proper bow, speaking to Rapunzel with all the warmth of their initial meeting. She smiled, but even from the distance Jack could tell it was a little forced. Their eyes met when she glanced at him, and he felt the knife twist in his chest.

Taking a deep breath, Jack approached, aware that the two advisors behind the king glared at him. But as the unofficial emissary of Warren, he had every right to be there no matter what scandal he had caused.

Fel was introducing himself as Jack reached them, the ambassador doing his best to look dignified around his black eye. It was hard to be smooth when sore muscles around his chest made it difficult to inhale, though.

North nodded, glancing between Fel's black eye and Jack's split lip. Jack saw understanding in the man's deep blue eyes, but there was no other reaction in his expression – save for a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"We were not anticipating your arrival, Governor North," one of the advisors said, voice wary. "To what do we owe this honor?"

"I was returning to Warren and felt the need to pay respects," North said, with a warm smile.

"What about Black?" Rapunzel asked suddenly.

North's smile faded, his expression turned dark. "When I delivered him to the prison I was told execution was scheduled. I did not stay, but I believe it has been done."

"Good."

Adela gasped and looked at her daughter. "Rapunzel."

"You don't know what he did," Rapunzel said. "What he-" her voice broke, and she had to take a deep, steadying breath. Her brother touched her shoulder.

All Jack wanted to do was hold her, and remind her she was safe – to banish the shadows across her thoughts. But he could only bury his clenched fists in his pocket to hide the strain that turned his knuckles white.

"What about you, Jack?" North asked, turning to look at him fully now formalities were out of the way.

Jack's lips pursed, and he looked away. He couldn't lie and say he was all right. But he couldn't say the truth, either. Not at the moment.

#

It took Jack the better part of an hour to tell North everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, since Hiccup and Merida had plenty to say on the subject. Hiccup added important details Jack forgot (and there were a lot of them). Merida added her opinion, which occasionally got them all sidetracked.

About halfway through North had to ask exactly what 'the shower incident' had been, since Jack had forgotten he hadn't told him about the week and a half spent onboard \_The Night Fury\_. That took a good seven to ten minutes.

After they finished, the suite's common room fell into a strange silence.

Hiccup and Merida sat on the couch they had wordlessly claimed as theirs. Jack sat on the back of the second couch. All three watched North while he sat in the arm chair, clearly thinking about everything they had just told him.

Eventually Jack had to look away, hands still in his hoodie pocket to hide the way his fingers flexed nervously, waiting for whatever reprimand he was about to receive.

After what felt like a life time, North let out a long breath, drawing all eyes back to him. "You never were the type to do things the easy way, eh Jack?"

"It's not like I \_try\_ to mess things up," Jack muttered. He pushed his bangs off his forehead. "It just happens."

North chuckled. "I know, Jack. Hard is not impossible, though. We will find way to make this work. Just as we always do, yes?"

Jack looked away again "not wanting to admit he didn't really have faith that there way anyway for this to work.

"We have a pretty good track record, too," Hiccup reminded with a grin.

Jack rubbed the back of his neck. A whisper in the back of his mind told him it was still hopeless but he looked at his friends, and thought about everything they had accomplished "both in his time on Warren and his time onboard the Night Fury.

The corner of his mouth started to tug in a grin. Doubt still nagged at the edges of his mind but there was a little hope now.

#

Jack did his best to stay out of politics "he always had. But no one had allowed him to avoid this. North said he was willing to do the talking, but Jack still had to be present. Though when he and North left the common room, Merida had lightly informed him that if he said anything stupid she would rip his tongue out.

"Nothing like having people who love you," he had muttered, shaking his head as he followed North out of the suite.

That was how he found himself in the living room area of Fel's suite, on the second floor of the guest wing. The room was decidedly nicer.

The Imperial scowled at Jack before turning to pour himself a glass of Corona's fire flower wine.

When the glass was full, and he had taken a long, slow sip, he turned

back to face them. "Why would I consider retracting my proposal?"

That stupid, stupid, word. Jack grimaced at the way it scraped inside his ear.

"Why is it so important to you?" he asked.

"Jack," North murmured, cautioning.

Right. Nothing stupid. He'd like to keep his tongue in his head.

Needing something to distract himself, he reached into his hoodie pocket and withdrew one of the chocolate eggs wrapped in green foil. Jack hadn't bothered asking why there was a supply of mint chocolates onboard The Sleigh (especially since North didn't like the flavor), he was just glad they were there.

He unwrapped the egg and tossed it into his mouth, focusing on the way the peppermint oil in the brown and green swirled chocolate chilled the inside of his mouth.

"Jack raises good point," North said. "Corona is small planet. What is benefit of alliance?"

Jack's conversation with Thomas the night before was fresh in his mind, but he wanted to know why Fel would go to the trouble. Especially one that would require so much of him. Corona was mostly a farming and mining planet, it's main exports were produce and precious metals, and the fire flower wine Fel was currently drinking. Occasionally fish and some meats were shipped to other planets in the system. But it didn't seem like enough to draw so much attention. He could write off the blockade as Gothel's insanity. But the New Empire's attention made little sense.

"Corona isn't much of a political player at the moment," Fel said slowly. "If Rapunzel became a senator as the council originally suggested, that could change. That won't happen, however. But it's the corner stone of this system. All the nearby planets exist in some level of dependence with them. You control Corona, you control the system."

"Keep Corona in the Empire, you keep the system," Jack frowned.

Fel nodded. "The next few years are going to be tumultuous, despite my father's best efforts. We would prefer to avoid any unnecessary unrest. Rapunzel is loved by her people, but has already been passed over for the throne. She's an ideal candidate."

"And she can only make you look better," Jack muttered. He realized that could be regarded as "stupid" and ducked his head.

"We're trying to establish a democratic empire â€" that's why I'm an ambassador, not a prince. My father can't name me his heir right now â€" I'll have to win public approval. And a beautiful princess at my side can only help that. And considering her history with Gothel, it will be a gesture to assure people this is a new era."

Jack's fist clenched in his pocket. He could almost say Fel was



asking for his eyes to match, the way he was talking about Rapunzel â€" but decided that wouldn't hold up as a defense. So he bit his tongue and forced himself to remain in his seat.

The room was quiet for several long moments, Jack doing his best to subtly glance between Fel and North, waiting for one of them to say something.

Finally North broke the silence. "If we could guarantee Corona's loyalty, as well as Warren's promise to stay out of the New Empire's affairs-

"Can you do that?" Jack asked, looking at North. Decisions like that were supposed to be put before all the governors â€" and Bunnymund was opposed to any deal with Imperials (Jack doubted New Imperials would be any different).

"Hush," North said under his breath.

They both looked at Fel, whose interest was visibly piqued.

The Imperial set his glass down with unnecessary care before looking back at them. "Warren has always been a wild card. You're not located on any of our charts, and there are more rumors than facts. One of those facts, however, is that your navy is a great risk to us."

Jack wasn't good at politics. But he was good with people. And Fel's body language spoke before he did.

"You can guarantee?" Fel asked, looking at North.

The older man nodded. "Yes."

Fel glanced at Jack briefly, clearly debating if this deal was worth losing to him again.

A tense moment passed, Jack's heart pounding against his ribs until he was sure the sound echoed off the walls.

Finally, Fel nodded. "You have a deal, Governor North."

#

"Why should I agree to this?" Thomas asked, looking more at Jack than North and Fel, though Jack hadn't said a word while Fel had retracted his proposal and North had presented his offer.

Jack was staying back from the politicians, leaning against a bookshelf while the others sat on the couches and arm chairs set up in the center of the library, where the meeting had been called.

Adela and Augustus sat on one of the couches. North, Fel and Thomas had both taken arm chairs.

Hiccup and Merida were on another couch off to the side â€" watching, but clearly not included.

Rapunzel sat between her mother and brother, looking down at her hands while she worried them in her lap. He had to fight back the

urge to walk over and take her hands to still them. Every so often they would glance at each other, eyes meeting. But both looked away, afraid to hope this might work in their favor.

Thomas's question hung in the air, waiting for any of them to speak.

Jack looked at North, hoping he had an answer. He knew his answer â€" "because I love her" â€" wouldn't work. So he had to leave it to his mentor.

But it wasn't North who spoke.

"Maybe the question should be: why wouldn't you?"

Jack blinked, turning to look at Augustus, who had leaned forward in his seat, closer to his father. Rapunzel looked at her brother, green eyes wide. Jack saw her lips move, but was too far to hear whatever it was she whispered.

"The way I see it, Rapunzel has to marry either Frost or Fel," the prince went on. Jack was so stunned he barely registered the prince's words. "I may not be especially fond of either, but we know which one she wants."

Jack and Rapunzel glanced at each other, and he saw in her eyes the same hope he was starting to feel. If they had been holding hands, their grips would have tightened simultaneously.

He tried to quell his hope and looked at Thomas.

The king was staring at his son.

"Augustus, are you forgettingâ€" "

"Rapunzel says nothing happened," Augustus said quietly. "Since when have you ever had reason to doubt her?"

"And I will vouch for Jack's integrity," North said.

Jack ducked his face into his hand, blushing at the very public discussion of his and Rapunzel's virginity. When he glanced through his fingers, he saw she was blushing as well, gaze fixed once more on her hands as though her fingernails were suddenly the most fascinating things in the universe.

Thomas continued to stare at his son.

"It's politically advantageous to both us and the Empire," Augustus went on. "And, as her brother, I would rather she be happy. But if anything did happen, it's all the more reason to insist he take responsibility."

Merida snorted.

Jack wondered why they were even there as he shot her a glare.

"Not helping," Hiccup muttered.

"Sorry."

Jack rolled his eyes, looking back at the man about to decide his and Rapunzel's fate.

Thomas turned to his wife, clearly searching for another opinion.

Adela, in turn, looked at her daughter, touching her hand. "Rapunzel, is this what you want?" She glanced at Jack. "Is he what you want?"

"Yes!" Rapunzel said, without hesitation, a hint of exasperation in her tone, as though she didn't understand why they were asking.

"This isn't a choice to be made lightly," Thomas said.

"The council can insist I marry Fel three hours after I've met him â€" but I can't trust my own heart after everything Jack and I have been through?" She stood up, shaking her head before turning to her father. "I wish I could have told you differently, but I made my choice already."

"Rapunzel." Her name escaped his lips before Jack could stop it. Not that he wanted to, though he wasn't sure if it was his own emotion at her words, or if he was trying to comfort her obvious agitation.

She glanced at him, then turned back to kneel in front of her father, touching his cheek. "Daddy â€" please understand. I want your blessing. I don't care about the throne, or rank â€" I just want this. I want him. Please."

Thomas sighed. "I want what's best for you, Rapunzel. That's all I want."

Jack looked away and closed his eyes, exhaling. Whether or not he was the best person for Rapunzel was still up for debate in his mind â€" and he wasn't sure he could fight back if Thomas said no on that grounds. He was an orphan with no memory, but with attitude and an inability to say the right thing at the right time â€" and the ability to create snow and ice. He wondered if Rapunzel remembered that his body temperature was going to drop as soon as he got back to Warren.

"You have my blessing."

Jack's heart stopped as his head jerked to look back at father and daughter.

Rapunzel looked back at him over her shoulder, standing up slowly.

Their eyes met, and his heart started to beat again. It felt strange for a moment, as though his heart had managed to escape his ribcage, there was a sense of freedom. It took him a moment to realize that the knife in his heart was gone, and all the muscles of his chest had finally relaxed.

He pushed away from the bookshelf and met her as she rushed toward him, throwing her arms around his neck. Catching her he wrapped his

arms around her waist, lifting her off her feet and spinning with her.

#

"Well, that was anticlimactic," Jack said, looking out at the pond as he leaned back to brace his hands in the cool grass.

Rapunzel sat beside him, almost touching his side.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Jack chuckled and looked over at her. "Think about everything we've been through: escaping the Tower, space battles, an Imperial search, a battle with a Nightmare King, not to mention I almost died â€" and yet being together didn't require some epic battle, it came down to politics."

Rapunzel giggled. "Well, you did get into a fight."

"Huh?"

She touched the corner of his lower lip gently, though he was still confused until he felt a the slight twinge of pain that reminded him of his split lip. It was now little more than a thin scab, but the nerves were still sensitive.

"If we were on Warren I could heal it," she murmured, fingertip tracing the scab.

"It's a split lip, Rapunzel," he chuckled, taking her hand as he sat up. "I've had a lot worse."

"I know."

"It'll be gone in a few days." He squeezed her hand. "But we do need to talk."

She met his eyes, and he saw nervousness flash in her eyes.

Reaching over he touched her cheek, his thumb brushing over her soft skin. After a moment she closed her eyes, leaning into his touch. The sight elicited a smile from him, despite the twinge from the scab on his lip.

"I love you," he whispered.

He felt her tense slightly and she opened her eyes. "But?"

"I have to go back to Warren," he said. "But I won't make you go with me."

She pulled away, and his hand fell back into the grass.

"Why not?"

"Because this is your home," he reminded, glancing at the palace grounds around them. "And I want you to be happy â€" I won't make you leave your family."

"I want to go," she said. She touched his cheek, the same way he had touched hers a few minutes earlier. "Jack, I want to be with you. You are my home. And if I don't go with you the council will make me marry someone eventually."

Jack closed his eyes, sighing in frustration as he felt his resolve slip.

"Do you not want me with you?" Her hand faltered on his cheek.

"I do!" He opened his eyes, taking her hand and threading his fingers through hers. He wanted to just accept that she'd said yes "but his conscience demanded his full disclosure. "Rapunzel, it's all I want."

"Then why?"

"I need you to understand what you would be agreeing to," he whispered. "How could I was that night on Warren " that's how could I will always be. I only have so much control over it. I-" he sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. He would have preferred to avoid what he was about to say next, but didn't see the point. "I don't know if I'll be able to make love to you, because I'm afraid of hurting you. So we may not be able to have children. And I can accept that " I just want to make sure you understand that before you make your decision."

Rapunzel looked out of the surface of the pond, and while Jack was terrified of losing her, he was glad to see she was truly giving through to his words. Having her say no now was better than her regretting her choice later. That was something he wouldn't be able to live with.

"That's part of why you said you would never marry, isn't it?" she asked, looking back at him after a while. "Merida told me. I think she was trying to warn me when she saw I was falling in love with you."

"What was that?" he asked, curious.

"O-on The Night Fury."

Jack quirked an eyebrow, waiting for a little more detail.

She blushed, biting her lip for a moment before she spoke. "Do you remember that night at dinner when you and Hiccup were talking about the repairs you were making to the ship."

"When you asked about the stability?"

She nodded.

Jack's brow rose a little higher. That had been several days before the search on Krash.

"When did you?" she trailed off, biting her lip.

Jack chuckled. "You might hate me."

"Why?"

"I think it might have started sooner, but I started to notice when we were in the shower unit," he admitted, averting his eyes as he ran a hand through his hair. "When you started crying, I realized all I wanted at that moment was to protect you."

"Really?"

He nodded. When he glanced over, he saw she was smiling.

"But that's why, isn't it?" she asked after a while. "Why you said you said you wouldn't marry?"

Jack picked up a nearby stone, turning it in his fingers. "Yeah, kinda. It was also because I'd never met a girl I was interested in, and that was my reason after I left Warren." He aimed and threw the rock, and watched it skip three times across the surface of the pond before it sunk down. " Butâ€¦ yeah. I completely forgot about it after I met you â€" until we went back to Warren."

They both looked at the water, and the fading ripples left by the rock.

"You were really never interested?" she asked. "All those girls who met on \_The Night Fury\_?"

"Nah." He chuckled. "They all had a really bad habit of getting me hurt."

They both laughed, glancing over at each other. Jack felt more relaxed than he had in a while. But he knew the conversation wasn't over, though they had managed to escape the serious topic for a few minutes.

"I won't make you do anything you don't want to do, Rapunzel," Jack said. "I don't want you to look back and regret being with me â€" whether it's because you had to leave Corona or because we can't have children. I'll accept whatever choice makes you happy."

Rapunzel rose to her knees, turning so she faced him. Jack met her eyes and didn't look away as she rested her hands against the side of his face again. Her other hand gently brushed aside his bands (though they fell right back into place).

"Let me be with you, Jack â€" that's all I want." She traced the scar over his eyebrow.

"Then I need to do this right," he whispered.

"What?"

Taking her hands, Jack stood up and she followed, looking at him curiously.

"I recently discovered that I have a profound dislike for the word 'proposal' â€" so I have a proposition."

She giggled, and Jack smiled.

"I've lived around Hiccup and merida long enough to know I can't

promise we'll never fight â€" but I promise I'll love you no matter what happens, good or bad. I'll do everything in my power to be the best I can for you. All I have to give is all I am. Can that be enough that you'll agree to marry me, Rapunzel of Corona?"

Rapunzel giggled. "For someone who doesn't like politics, you can be awfully diplomatic."

"When it's important," Jack shrugged. "Not many things are. But this is my heart on the line."

"You say that as though you thought I could say no."

"Well, you still haven't answered," he pointed out.

She smiled. "Yes, Jack. I'll marry you."

Jack smiled, ignoring the pain in his split lip as he pulled her into a hug.

"One thing, though," he said, when he pulled back. "No more showers or sharing a bed until we're married â€" I'd like to avoid any more scandal."

Rapunzel rolled her eyes, but still giggled.

## 17. Chapter 17

\*\*I thought this was going to be the wedding chapter, but that won't be until the next chapter. I realized there were a few things that needed to be taken care of before the actual ceremony. \*\*

Among The Stars

Chapter 17

In the few moments Jack had imagined himself getting married, this wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind.

But people on Warren loved celebrations, wedding most of all. His position as a Governor, living in Warren Territory palace, meant his wedding was a palace wide event. And word spread from one town to another, and through all the territories. And while none of the average civilians had the loyalty to him they had to their territory's governor (even the few people that lived on the edges of the Winter Territory didn't pay him much attention), just the thought of a wedding put them in a festive mood. Jack supposed he could understand it, when he thought about it.

Marrying a princess didn't make it any less of a big deal. Even more so because it involved not one world, but two .

Just arranging the wedding had taken more negotiations than Jack could normally have handled. He had endured a three hour argument about which culture's customs should be used for what part of the wedding. Thankfully North had handled negotiations (both before they left Corona, and later over interplanetary communication), and Tooth had handled the arrangements for the ceremony on Warren.

He was fairly sure it was inconvenient to arrange a wedding while the bride-to-be was on another planet. But someone had decided it was best for Rapunzel to stay on Corona until the wedding â€" probably to avoid possible scandal. But he had decided it was best not to fight.

Jack spun his staff between his fingers, breathing hard as he brought it up to deflect Nightlight's next blow. They had agreed no powers â€" this was physical training. And with his wedding the next day, Jack needed it to clear his thoughts.

He pushed Nightlight's staff aside, and swung the end of his own staff toward his friend's chin.

Nightlight swept the blow aside with his forearm, and brought his staff around again, this time towards Jack's lower legs.

Jack vaulted backwards, using one hand to spring off the ground. He caught sight of Merida from the corner of his eyes. She leaned back against the railing of a nearby walkway, more interested in the ceramic mug she was eating from than the fight she claimed to be watching.

He landed on his feet, just in time to block another blow with his staff.

The sweat on his bare chest froze in a thin layer of frost, keeping his body cool despite the warm air and the exertion of his body.

"Are you nervous?" Nightlight asked, with another attack.

"You're married," Jack reminded. "You have to ask?"

Nightlight chuckled. "Good point.

He kicked aside Jack's staff.

"Sorry I missed that," Jack said, meaning it. He ducked under the next sweep of Nightlight's staff.

He had been in the academy during Katherine and Nightlight's wedding. He hadn't even known it was happening.

Nightlight shook his head, avoiding Jack's attack.

The spar was an exercise in control, both holding back to avoid either of their weapons making contact. Normally they would have gone all out with little regard for a few cuts and bruises. But today Jack would rather avoid it. A black eye wouldn't go very well with his formal clothing for the ceremony.

Both opponents took a couple steps back, breathing deep to balance out their lungs as they calculated their next moves.

"I don't think they ordered enough ice cream," Merida said suddenly, her spoon scraping the inside of her mug.

"Not if you keep eating it," Jack said, not looking away from Nightlight, who grinned at the comeback.



"If this ice cream wasn't so good I'd chuck it at yer head."

Jack rolled his eyes and attacked Nightlight. He arced his staff around and up, but Nightlight blocked easily. Jack was more concerned with moving than winning â€" not that he had a very good record when it came to beating his friend.

Jack lifted one hand to wipe sweat from his forehead before returning it to grip the staff just before blocking another blow. He countered again.

"Jack,"

Both opponents pulled away and looked toward Toothiana, who was coming toward them through the gardens.

"Yeah?" he picked up the towels they had set aside before starting, tossing one to Nightlight and using the other to wipe his own forehead and neck.

"The ship from Corona is arriving," she said, smiling. Her excitement was obvious from her erratic flight.

Jack's heart skipped a beat as the meaning of her words registered in his mind.

Rapunzel.

He picked up the hoodie he had left by the towels. Baby Tooth has been sitting in the blue fabric, but returned to the air when he reached for it, following him as the wind picked him up and carried him toward the landing pad, where a landing party had already gathered.

The royal Coronan flag ship was coming in for a landing as the wind set him down beside the others.

"Weren't they supposed to be here yesterday?" he asked as he touched down, baby Tooth lighting on his shoulder.

Nightlight landed a few moments behind him. Toothiana arrived, but didn't actually set down.

"Yeah," Bunnymund said. "Kind Thomas said they were delayed."

"Right." Jack rolled his eyes. "Probably trying to talk her out of it at the last moment."

"You're so negative, Jack," Katherine said, smiling as she stroked Kailash's feathered neck. The snow goose honked cheerfully, head butting Jack's shoulder to get his attention.

He pet the goose's head absently. "I've decided if I wasn't like this before, it's a souvenir from the Academy."

"The Academy," Bunnymund said, ears twitching.

"I figured," Jack muttered.

They all looked toward the ship as it set down. Jack's throat clenched, his hand falling away from Kailash's head,

Bunnymund rested a paw on Jack's shoulder as the loading ramp began to lower. "Don't do anythin' stupid, Mate."

"Define stupid."

"Jack!"

Forgetting about Bunnymund and the definition of any word, Jack shrugged out from the Pooka's paw. Rapunzel was running down the ramp with no apparent regard for the landing party still on the ship behind her. The wind picked him up so he could meet her at the bottom of the ramp.

He pulled her into a hug, lifting her off her feet and spinning her around as he held her for the first time in two months. Two months too long.

He took a deep breath of her floral and sunlight scent, arms tightening around her waist. "Let's not do that again."

"Tell me about it," she whispered.

Jack set her back on her feet. Letting go of her waist, he slid his hand around hers.

The others were coming toward them: her family down the landing ramp, his across the landing pad.

"Princess," Bunnymund greeted, with a small bow. "Welcome back t' the Warren."

"I'm glad to be back." She squeezed Jack's hand. "And I haven't thanked you for personally making this possible. Jack told me how hard it must have been for you to agree to the New Empire's conditions."

"The way I see it, it was worth it, Sheila," Bunnymund said. "We hope you'll be happy here."

Rapunzel looked at Jack, smiling as she squeezed his hand again. "I think I will be."

"Hopefully you'll be able t' keep Frostbite here outta trouble."

"I'll do my best."

"Hey!" Jack looked between the two in mock offense, but it didn't last long before it gave way to a grin. He was too happy to have her back to do anything much beyond smiling.

North had stepped forward to greet the royal family, Toothiana fluttering at his side. He now led them forward.

"Your Majesties, this is E. Aster Bunnymund, Governor of Warren Territory."

The introductions continued from there. And even with Rapunzel's hand in his, he started calculating how soon he could get away from the politics of the whole thing â€" then wondered if that would fit into Bunnymund's definition of "stupid." Probably, so he called on all his self-discipline, and focused on Rapunzel's small hand in his.

About the same time Nightlight and Katherine were being introduced to Rapunzel's parents and brother, Rapunzel leaned against his side, letting go of his hand to slide her around his waist.

"If you're cold," he whispered, leaning down to whisper to her, but she didn't let him finish.

"You're not that cold," she said. "Actually, it's nice in this heat."

Jack looked around, realizing for the first time how warm it probably was to someone whose body wasn't cooled by an inner frost. He tightened his arm around her shoulders, kissing the top of her head. "I love you."

"You haven't reconsidered?"

Jack chuckled. "Not a chance, Princess."

"I'm glad." She rose on her toes to kiss him â€" a gesture Jack gladly accepted.

"Rapunzel."

They broke away and looked over at her mother and Toothiana.

"We're going to have to steal her for a while, Jack," Adela said, smiling warmly. "We have to get ready for dinner."

"Will Hiccup and Merida be at dinner?" Rapunzel asked, looking back at him.

Jack nodded. "Hiccup's training with the fleet, and I seem to have lost Merida â€" not a good thing. I should probably go find her before she eats all the ice cream."

Rapunzel giggled and followed her mother and Toothiana, who led her to the guest rooms that had been prepared.

#

Jack wiped water from his eyes, shaking his head to excise water from his hair.

Merida had decided to take a nap, so Jack didn't have to worry about her for a few hours, and Hiccup would be back by then. Nightlight had something to take care of, so their spar was over. His responsibilities in Winter were taken care of for the next few day. So he had the afternoon free until dinner.

It was equal parts relaxing and frustrating. Part of him needed something to do â€" his nerves would drive him insane if something didn't distract him.

Hence, he stood waist deep in the garden pool. With his wedding the next day, most everyday tasks were either taken care of or barred from him â€" something about staying out of trouble, especially now the Coronans had arrived.

Even Isolfr was being strangely cooperative â€" if annoying. He was sleeping near the water's edge, refusing to tell Jack why he had left Winter. It wasn't all that rare for one of his wolves to leave the territory while he was in Warren, but Isolfr usually stayed in the forest to guide the pack. Jack suspected the wolf's presence had something to do with the wedding, but had resolved to ignore the alpha male.

Jack pushed his hair back, preparing to dive under the surface again. But just before he did, he heard Toothiana's voice coming toward him through the gardens. He turned back as she came through the archway hedge, followed by Thomas and Augustus.

"This is the pool â€" you're free to swim any time you like," Toothiana was saying. Then glanced at Jack and smiled. "Though you may want to wait a few hours after Jack gets out."

"Not funny," Jack muttered.

"What do you mean?" Thomas asked, looking between Jack and Toothiana.

Isolfr hadn't lifted his head, but his light blue eyes were open, watching the exchange without comment or expression.

Jack sighed, pushing his hair back again. He had wondered if Rapunzel told her family much about his powers. Apparently not. But now he would have to.

"She means this," he said.

He rested one hand on the surface of the water, a thin layer of ice spreading across the top from his palm, the frost like an unfurling fern.

"Jack is Governor of the Winter Territory," Toothiana said. "That means power over the winter elements."

"His powers over ice and snow," Augustus said. "Rapunzel mentioned it."

"My disastrous first impression," Jack muttered, remembering that she mentioned them while introducing him.

The wind picked him up from the water, setting him down next to the marble bench where he had left his towel and hoodie. His staff lay nearby in the grass, next to Isolfr. He trusted the wolf to guard it, at least.

"More a misunderstanding than a disaster," Augustus said.

Jack looked at the young man, surprised at what could almost be viewed as a warm reception â€" not something he had expected from any of Rapunzel's family, though she had told him they accepted the

upcoming marriage. He had been under the impression Augustus had encouraged his father to let Rapunzel choose Jack only because he was a better option than Fel.

"Misunderstandings are unfortunately common for me," Jack chuckled. He shrugged back into his hoodie.

Baby Tooth chose that moment to make her appearance (she had been off chasing something), flying up to Thomas and Augustus, examining them with her usual curiosity.

"Baby Tooth," Toothiana chastened. "Don't be rude."

The fairy chirped apologetically, returning to Jack's shoulder. He chuckled, looking at the small fairy. She shrugged.

"Jack, would you mind showing them around?" Toothiana asked. "I have a few last minute preparations for tomorrow."

Jack's eyes widened as he realized what she was asking him to do. "Toothâ€"

"It'll be fine, Jack," she assured, resting a hand briefly on the shoulder that didn't already hold one of her fairies.

"Famous last words," Just muttered, watching as the vibrant fairy queen fluttered away over the hedge.

\_This should be interesting,\_ Isolfr said, rising up from the grass.

Jack glared at the wolf. He flipped his staff up with his foot, catching it easily, though briefly considering if he could turn the motion into an "accidental" kick to the wolf's chin. But decided not to risk it.

But he did glower at the wolf, who only laughed in response.

"I had hoped for a chance to speak with you, Jack," Thomas said.

That didn't sound good. Jack ran the towel over his hair one more time before draping it over his free shoulder, since Baby Tooth seemed unwilling to even over by him, staying on his left shoulder instead. At least someone was on his side â€" and not just following in the hope of seeing him humiliate himself, the way Isolfr probably was.

Thomas and August eyed the wolf at Jack's side warily as he led them from the pool area and back into the gardens.

The three men walked in silence for a few minutes. The breeze joined them, curious what was happening. It didn't understand what was happening, but it could feel the tension. And with all the activity in Warren, the wind's attention was already on the territory, wondering why so much attention was being directed at Jack.

Eventually its questions became too much for Jack to handle on top of his own thoughts â€" he flexed the hand not holding his staff,

telling her to go somewhere else for the time being. She was at first reluctant, but the breezes complied with his instruction and swept down the tunnel of hanging wisteria plants they were walking through.

Baby Tooth seemed to feel his agitation, and she touched the side of his neck with her tiny hands in an attempt to comfort him. It helped to an extent.

"Thanks, Baby Tooth," he murmured, reaching up to stroke her head absently.

"I've never seen a planet like this," Augustus said. "Fairies, walking eggs and abominable snowmen"

"Yetis," Jack corrected.

They had reached the end of the tunnel. He jumped up, using his free hand to catch the low hanging branch of an apple tree that grew next to the path. He used it to swing forward a few feet. He didn't bother calling on the wind as he let go, instead bending his knees to take the impact.

"They prefer to be called yetis," he clarified, straightening out. "And they're not really the kind of people you want to rink insulting."

"I imagine that's something to keep in mind," Thomas said.

They continued walking, Augustus falling a few steps behind them as he looked at the planets around them.

Jack pushed his bangs off his forehead again, taking a deep breath and letting it out in an attempt to calm his pounding heart.

"I'm sorry," he said, sliding his free hand into the pocket of his hoodie.

"For what?" Thomas asked.

"Things didn't go as well as I would have liked on Corona," Jack said. "Seems like things went from bad to worse" not that I helped. I kept making the wrong move."

"You certainly could have handled the situation better," Thomas said.

On Jack's left shoulder, Baby Tooth huffed. Beyond her, at his side, Isolfr laughed.

Jack just cringed at the edge in the man's voice, but accepted that he deserved it. He had thought of a hundred things he could have done differently.

Thomas sighed. "No" I told myself I wouldn't I owe you an explanation, Jack. I didn't handle it as well as I could have, either."

The king stopped, and Jack did the same, turning to face the older man.

"Rapunzel and I have always been close, since she was a baby," he said. "My wife and I tried for years to have children. We have given up by the time she became pregnant with Rapunzel, and I nearly lost them both a few months before she was born. She's always been so happy and bubbly â€" she's one of the brightest lights in my life."

If he was trying to make Jack feel guilty, he was doing an excellent job of it. His hand tightened around his staff, the hand in his pocket clenched as well. He knew Rapunzel's light. She had blazed into his life like a rising sun, casting light on all the shadows he had been running from for nearly five years.

Did he have the right to take that light from anyone else?

"When the Empire took her hostage, we had no power to save her â€" I lost hope of seeing her again. So when we received word that she had escaped, then that you were bringing her backâ€" Thomas's voice broke, and he looked away.

Jack resisted the urge to look away.

"I thought, perhaps, we could return to normal. But when she came back she wasâ€" she was so different â€" so quiet and withdrawn."

"She had just spent nearly eighteen weeks in the Tower, as Gothel's personal toy," Jack reminded, doing his best to keep the edge out of his voice, now he had an idea where this conversation was going. Though he wasn't so much upset at Thomas, but the thought of Rapunzel in the Tower always set his teeth on edge. "Anyone would be quiet and withdrawn after that. I spent twenty minutes with her when I was nineteen, and I left the room with my brain in knots."

"I understand," Thomas said, holding up a hand in defense. "I understand now. But at the time, I only saw the way she looked at you on the landing platform â€" as though her heart was breaking."

"Okay, that part was my fault," Jack sighed. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I shouldn't have avoided her on The Night Fury."

Thomas nodded. "I need you to understand, Jack. I finally had my daughter back â€" against all odds â€" only to see immediately that I was losing her again to you. At the time, I believed her relationship â€" whatever it was â€" to be, at the worst, unhealthy, or possibly brought on by her relief at being rescued."

Jack rubbed his forehead, trying not to dwell on the echo of his own fears back on Corona. A nightmare king could hardly put it better.

"I didn't help," he muttered.

"Not really," Thomas nodded.

Jack's fingers flexed around the staff again, without him giving thought to the motion. The breeze caught the motion, and his agitation. It tousled his hair lightly, rustling the papery leaves of

the nearby juniper trees. It swirled, expecting him to call on it, not understanding why it didn't.

Thomas and Augustus looked around at the wind's unnatural pattern.

Jack withdrew his right hand from his hoodie pocket, waving it to calm the wind.

They both eyed him warily.

"Sorry," he said.

Thomas nodded slowly. "Rapunzel had clearly chosen you. But tell me: how can I trust my daughter to you, someone I barely know?"

The question he had been dreading. He could always point out that at least he wasn't Fel; he actually cared about Rapunzel, not her rank or appearance. But that didn't seem like it would be the best course of action.

"I don't know," he admitted finally. The breeze tried to his agitation again, but he waved it away before it could do more than ruffle his hair. "I'm not perfect, and she could probably do better than me. But I know I love her. Somehow she makes me better than I am. I would die for her. I already have. And I'd rather die than live without her. But if I knew being with me would hurt her, I'd walk away right now."

Thomas looked at him, expression unreadable.

Jack held his arms open. "I told Rapunzel I would give her everything I am. She says that's enough. I understand if you don't think so."

On his shoulder, Baby Tooth wrapped a tiny hand around a fold of his hood, her gossamer wings quivering in agitation. Isolfr had sat back on his haunches, watching with keep blue eyes.

Thomas's expression grew thoughtful.

Jack was unsure if the mounting tension was in his own muscles or the seconds that felt as though they were being stretched to the breaking point as his arms fell back to his side. His hand clenched his staff, the tendons in his hand tightening painfully.

"How old are you, Jack?" he finally asked.

"Twenty-three in a few months." He didn't bother to clarify he didn't know his exact birthday — his amnesia made sure of that. Bunnymund's science had only been able to narrow it down so far.

"I can tell you've been through a great deal already."

Jack chuckled. "You have no idea."

Thomas nodded slowly.

\*\*For all of you who have been asking how old Jack is. \*\*



## 18. Chapter 18

**\*\*This is the first Jackunzel wedding, to my knowledge. In fanfiction, at leastâ€¦ you'll have to let me know if I'm wrong. I'm so tired of Jack showing up to Punz and Flynn's wedding, though. Those always break my heart.\*\***

**\*\*So, since it's a sci-fi story, I wanted to at least give the wedding unique elements, though I found I couldn't get too far from the typical American ceremony (which I know very little about, actually, since I've never been to a wedding). Neither **\*\*\_\*\*Star Wars Union\*\*\_\*\*** (Luke Skywalker's wedding to Mara Jade) or **\*\*\_\*\*Star Wars The Courtship of Princess Leia\*\*\_\*\*** (Han Solo and Princess Leia's wedding) prepared me for this â€" and even Spock's near marriage in **\*\*\_\*\*Star Trek The Original Series\*\*\_\*\*** (which I've been watching) didn't help me much. In the end I was left pretty much on my own, with a few glances at **\*\*\_\*\*Tangled Ever After\*\*\_\*\*** (not much help either, for the record). I decided to go very much with symbolism â€" most of it is explained in the story. I did try to give the vows a similar feel to the Guardian's Oath from the movie. Not sure how well I did.\*\***

**\*\*When I asked for ideas for the wedding on tumblr, rotbtdfangirls suggested lots of fresh flowers. I hope there are enough flowers for her. XD\*\***

**\*\*Chapter dedicated to Eva Marvex (Daydreamerssmile on tumblr), from her advice, ideas, and listening to me while I cry, whine and vent.\*\***

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 18\_

Jack was woken up by a pillow slamming against his back.

"Wake up, Frost," Merida said, her voice breaking the last hold unconsciousness had over him. "Come on, or ye're gonna miss yer own weddin'."

The pillow collided with his shoulder blades again.

"If you'd stop hitting me with that pillow, I might actually be able to sit up," Jack muttered, rolling onto his back, throwing up his arms to block her next blow before it collided with his solar plexus. He succeeded, but she pulled back and made another pass. He rolled his eyes, sat up and caught the pillow, this time yanking it from her grasp. "Would you stop it?"

"Tooth already let ya sleep in," Merida said. "Now git up, Frostbite."

"Don't you have pickles and ice cream to eat?" he asked around a yawn. "Ech. I get a bad taste in my mouth just saying that."

"Someone had t' wake ya up â€" 'specially since yer wolves are terrorizin' the Corona's, an' ye're the only one that can call 'em off."

That made his hand freeze in the middle of pushing back his bangs.  
"What are they doing?"

Merida shrugged. "Just wanderin' the gardens. But the Coronans don't seem too fond of 'em."

Nothing unusual then. The pack was free to go wherever they wanted around the palace and gardens when they were there (which wasn't often â€" they preferred to stay in Winter, and their own hunting grounds). But he'd forgotten the Coronans probably weren't used to wolves walking around.

The door closed behind Merida as he got up and went over to the closet.

All the furniture that had been in the room when he got back was still just as it had been when he was seventeen, but most of his personal items had already been moved into the new room a few halls down that he would share with Rapunzel from tonight forward. (He tried not to think too much about that, not exactly sure how to feel. Excitement felt wrong somehow â€" but when he pushed that aside nerves and worry took its place.) So the only clothes left in the closet were his formal outfit for the ceremony, as well as a pair of jeans and a black tshirt he had set aside so he would have something to wear while he took care of the last few things before he had to get ready for the ceremony. Toothiana would never let him live it down if he ruined his formal clothes hours before the ceremony.

As he finished dressing and reached for his staff he glanced toward Baby Tooth's small alcove in the corner. She had passed out before he did when they had gotten back from dinner, and she didn't need much sleep so he wasn't surprised when he saw no sign of her. She was probably with Rapunzel, or anywhere where something was going on. She was as excited about the wedding as anyone.

By the time he got to the door the snow fox, which had been returned to him from the North Pole, was scratching at the door, looking at him with pleading green eyes. Jack grinned, opening the door and letting the fox out before leaving as well, closing the door behind him.

As carried him to the gardens outside the guest wing, he passed two yetis who each carried a bucket full of fresh flowers, arguing with each other and gesturing with their furry arms, as though they had no idea what to do with all the flowers. Jack didn't blame or envy them.

Someone called his name as he flew past one of the larger ponds (there were several of various sizes, in addition to the pool), and he pulled to a stop, hovering midair as he looked around. He finally sat Katherine sitting in a near one of the trees near the water's edge, her book laying in her lap. He wasn't too surprised by her presence, since Kailash was floating on the water's surface.

"I heard something about the wolves," he said.

"A big deal about nothing," Katherine said, waving a hand. Then she nodded over her shoulder, to the right of the way Jack had been going. "They're by the snapdragons. Once you're done with that, Tooth

is looking for you."

"Right," he nodded. "Thanks Katherine!"

"No problem," she said. And Kailash honked after him cheerfully.

Isolfr's mate, Eira, was in the grassy area by the snapdragon flowers as Katherine had said watching two of her pups wrestle with each other, rolling among the grass with small yips that sounded suspiciously like small laughs.

They ran up to him at he arrived, jumping up to meet him as he set down, asking him to play with them. He wanted to but remembered Katherine's reminder that Toothiana was looking for him.

Once Eira began herding her pups toward another part of the gardens, away from the guest wing, he flew back toward the palace in search of the fairy queen that had taken charge of the day's events.

#

Warren palace was decorated more lavishly than Jack had ever seen which was saying something. While he'd never witnessed a wedding for one of the governors, and never one in the palace itself, he'd seen plenty other festivals and celebrations.

As usual, all the governors were represented in the color scheme of the decorations North's red, Bunny's green, Sandy's gold, Toothiana's pink, Nightlight's light blue, Katherine's yellow, though Jack's own dark blue, with the addition of Corona's gold sun emblem on a deep purple background, were the most frequent.

And flowers were everywhere, in every possible shade. Bunnymund, a proud gardener, had gathered more than Jack had thought necessary (in addition to putting his chocolate making eggs into overdrive though no one was really complaining about that). Then the Coronans had brought literally hundreds more, including the golden lilies that represented the royal family. He wasn't complaining (he wouldn't dare) but it was a lot of flowers.

It seemed like everywhere he went in the palace there were more yeits arguing about what to do with the buckets full of them.

The sanctuary where the ceremony was to take place was a large, rectangular shaped room made with light stained wood amidst the white washed walls. Tall, narrow windows lined the side walls at regular intervals, filling the room with warm light from the sun that was about to start setting. It was filled for the most part with rows of benches (Jack had no idea where all these people came from, or why they were at his wedding), save for the dais at the front. High on the front wall was a large, circular window that represented the moon.

Dark blue fabric was draped from the rafters, to the wall space between the windows. And, of course, flowers were everywhere, filling the room with their perfume.

Jack had refrained from saying anything about the formal clothing he was required to wear marrying Rapunzel was worth it. That was

something he had never expected to say. Though it didn't make him any less uncomfortable as he stood a few feet inside the sanctuary doors. The black slacks, with a silver line down the outside of the legs, were fine. But the high collared, light blue shirt, and the dark blue jacket with black and silver detailing " just the fact they were formal made them annoying.

His nerves certainly weren't helping. It was taking all his self-discipline not to fidget.

A small hand poked the side of his back. "Jack."

He looked back as Sascha, the young girl sitting behind him. She and her brother Petter were two of the orphans that lived in the Warren palace.

Sascha pointed at the wooden floor, where frost was spreading further and further from his feet, despite the boots forced on him.

"The room's getting cold," she whispered.

"Sorry," he chuckled, tousling her hair lightly as he pulled in his aura of cold.

Finally the heavy double doors were opened by the yetis that stood on the other side. His left hand tightened around his staff.

One of the hardest parts of the negotiations had been whether or not the ceremony would follow Corona or Warren's customs. It had taken three hours (and a splitting headache on Jack's part), but they had gotten the Warren ceremony he and Rapunzel had agreed they wanted. He had wanted it in part because he already knew the customs, and they were less complex than Corona's from the research he had done. Rapunzel said that if she was going to live on Warren, she wanted to follow Warren's customs. "I might as well start now," she had said. Hack though that should have been enough, but Corona's council seemed to have been determined to fight every step of the way.

Corona's custom was for the bride to be led to the altar by her father.

But they followed Warren's custom. Thomas and Adela stood on either side of Rapunzel just on the other side of the doorway. Jack stepped forward to meet them, holding his right hand over the threshold to Rapunzel. Their eyes locked through her sheer white veil, and her smile made his heart begin to race.

Her dress was layers of flowing white chiffon. Her seventy feet of golden hair had been expertly done up, strings of pearls and fresh flowers twisted and braided amongst the strands, though it still trailed on the floor.

She smiled as she accepted his hand with her left, a symbol that she accepted him as her husband and guardian. He still wasn't sure why she accepted him. But she was grateful she did.

He tore his eyes away from her (which was almost impossible, as beautiful as she was " and the fact she was marrying him), and looked at Thomas. The king met his gaze, nodding slowly as he took a white sash and tied it around their joined hands " the symbol of

his approval. Jack bowed to both her parents, out of respect and gratitude, and the gesture was more than just symbolic.

They turned and Jack led her down the aisle toward the dais at the front, her parents a few feet behind the train of Rapunzel's veil.

Jack wasn't sure if it took a second or an hour to reach the front of the sanctuary.

North waited for them on the dais, along with Nightlight, Hiccup and Merida.

Once her parents were seated in the front row, they turned to North, who began to read the wedding ceremony from the leather bound book he held. The last time Jack had heard it had been when he renewed his oath as a governor two months earlier. He barely heard what his mentor said now, he was too busy trying to look at Rapunzel from the corner of his eye, without actually turning his head away from North.

Rapunzel squeezed his hand, and he returned the gesture.

"Will you, Jack Frost, take Rapunzel of Corona as our wife from this day forward, until parted by death, forsaking all others for her, to protect and cherish, love and honor?"

"I will," Jack said, unable to fight back his smile, and not wanting to.

"With you, Rapunzel, take Jack Frost as your husband, from this day forward, until parted by death, forsaking all others for him, to love and honor, cherish and respect? And will you keep him out of trouble?"

Jack opened his mouth to retort (he didn't miss Merida's laugh), but Rapunzel squeezed his hand again.

"I will," she said, her smile radiant.

Jack closed his mouth, deciding to just let it go. He forgot about it a moment later.

"As Governor of the North Pole Territory, I, Nicholas St. North, declare you are husband and wife. Jack, you may kiss the bride."

"Gladly." Turning toward Nightlight, who stood behind him to the left, he tossed him his staff. "Hold this for me, will you?"

Nightlight caught it easily in the hand not already holding his own staff.

Rapunzel smiled as Jack turned back to her and lifted her veil.

He reached up to touch her cheek, running his knuckles from her temple, down her jaw slowly, watching as her eyes closed. He felt her breath hitch as he lifted her chin, unable to stop as small smirk as he leaned down, lips brushing against hers.

He started to pull back, trying to keep the kiss chaste. But before he could, Rapunzel twined her free arm around his neck, keeping him close. Surprise made him freeze for a moment, but he quickly responded, his arm sliding around her waist. He wanted to hold her, but with their hands still bound that wasn't really an option.

But he forgot that as he realized it was the first time he was truly free to kiss her. No one had the right to disapprove, and no one could step in again.

He savored it. Savored the taste of her, and the way her fingers tangled in the hair at the back of his neck.

He vaguely registered the applause and cheers from people present, including an especially loud whoop from Merida. And part of him wanted to cheer as wellâ€| but a much larger part decided he would rather kiss Rapunzel.

Too soon he heard North clear his throat. He and Rapunzel pulled back just enough to look at the older man.

He gestured toward the door of the sanctuary â€" a reminder that the ceremony was over, but the wedding wasn't.

#

The lantern was simple waxed paper, with his snowflake emblem on one side, Corona's sun emblem on the other. Rapunzel told him she had made it herself, unlike the thousands of others, which had been commissioned from artisans on both Corona and Warren.

Phil the yeti brought it, along with several matched, when everyone had left the sanctuary, and they stood on the porch in front of the doors. Jack was glad this was the last public part of the ceremony. All the people watching them was unnerving. But the lanterns were a tradition that marked any event in the royal family.

Rapunzel held the lantern while Jack struck one of the matches. A bright drop of flame ignited, dancing in the breeze.

"Watch your fingers," he whispered, lighting the lantern while keeping the flame as far from her fingers as possible. It took easily, the light shining through the paper, silhouetting the emblems and patterns that decorated it. Jack blew out the match as he took the other side of the lantern, holding back his powers as much as he could while the flame warmed the air inside.

Rapunzel nodded (she was the one with experience when it came to the lanterns), and they let down. Jack's breath caught as the lantern rose from their fingers, floating upwards toward the sky. Other lanterns were lit and released by those present, rising slowly and silently, illuminating the evening sky.

## 19. Chapter 19

\*\*Featuring an appearance by Tsar Lunar, The Man In The Moon himself! And, in which I overuse the words "light", "glow", "radiance", "luminous", "radiant", as well as several others â€" all in the space

of about 100 words.\*\*

\*\*Also, since it's mentioned in this chapter: the tradition of carrying the bride over the threshold is a Viking custom. I'm trying to keep the wedding customs distinct. And I couldn't have Jack carry Rapunzel over the threshold without giving a reason, since this is a sci-fi story. But when it comes to Berk, I'm just going with the HTTYD books, and what little I know about Viking customs, with the obvious sci-fi twist. But at the same time, I didn't want him to actually carry her bridal style.\*\*

\*\*While writing and editing this chapter, I listened to Gabrielle Aplin's song Start of Time on loop â€" thank you to chocolafied and daydreamerssmile on tumblr, who introduced me to this song. It has been added to the playlist.\*\*

\*\*In my mind, at least, this chapter earns the T rating. Though some of you may think nothing of it. \*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 19\_

This time the yetis actually had a chance to prepare, so the banquet hall was even more brilliantly decorated than when \_The Night Fury\_ had first arrived, with so many candles and lanterns the room seemed to glow with their light. The paper lanterns overhead alternated with the colors and symbols of the governors, now with Corona's sun emblem. The tables were draped in the same colors, decorated with vases of brightly colored flowers. Jack still believed the amount was superfluous â€" but at the moment he really didn't care.

Rapunzel leaned toward him, squeezing his hand. "Are you actually hungry?"

Jack gestured to the plate of barely touched food in front of him in way of answer. "You?"

She shook her head. "Too excited."

He glanced at her as he took a drink of fruit juice. He didn't lower it, and managed to keep a straight face, as he asked: "For what?"

She smiled, resting her chin on his shoulder.

Jack smirked and shook his head.

After a moment he glanced around. Nearly everyone was more interested in talking amongst themselves than eating. The only person still actively eating was Merida. Very little if any attention was directed toward the newlyweds â€" they were expected to slip off into the night soon anyway.

From the corner of his eye he noticed Sandy trying to get someone's attention a ways down the hall.

"Come on," he said, turning back to Rapunzel and taking her hand. "I want to show you something."

"Kay." She stood up as well, and he started to lead her around the main table and toward the door.

But they didn't get anywhere near the door before everyone's attention was caught by a loud jingling, much louder than the sound of the elves' hats, which they had all quickly relegated to white noise. They looked around until all eyes landed on Sandy, who hovered three feet or so off the ground, holding one of North's elves by its jingle bell tipped hat. The elf looked extremely jostled; its eyes out of focus from the violent shaking Sandy had just given it.

Dropping the elf in a visible huff, Sandy pointed upwards towards the circular skylight in the high, vaulted ceiling above the strings of lanterns.

Jack, and everyone present, looked up to see the full moon directly overhead. As they looked, all the lights in the room dimmed, until the only light was the silvery moonlight that spilled into the banquet hall, onto the circular design in the floor that bore the symbol of the governors.

The hall had fallen silent. Even the Coronans, who couldn't understand the significance of what was happening " only that something \_was\_ happening.

"What is it?" Rapunzel whispered.

"The Man in the Moon," Jack said, his voice tight. "I wasn't expecting him to make an appearance."

"Why wouldn't he? You are a governor."

"He's never paid me much attention." He managed a weak grin. "It must be for you, Princess."

He looked back towards the moonbeams coming through the skylight.

The room was silent.

"Oh." Rapunzel gasped.

Jack looked back at her when her hand tightened around his. Her eyes were wide as she turned her head to meet his gaze.

Before he could ask, he felt the familiar touch of moonlight on his mind, and his eyes turned back to the moonbeams. Tsar Lunar didn't speak to them in words, more in feelings and impressions. The same as when he had told Jack his name after he had woken up at the pond in Winter " he had just had a knowing that his name was Jack Frost, and that the moon had told him so.

After a time, the moonbeams returned back through the skylight. Everyone in the hall was left blinking, as though they were just coming out of a daze. And in a way, maybe they were.

"Come on." He squeezed Rapunzel's hand, hurrying toward the door before the others could think to look around for them. Outside the air was cooler than it had been earlier in the day, but still warm.



He assumed so, at least. He could feel the difference, but couldn't gauge exactly what it would be for anyone with a normal body temperature. But Rapunzel didn't seem cold in her strapless dress.

He led her down one of the paths that would take them deeper into the garden, letting go of her hand to unzip his jacket, but not bothering to take it off so it wouldn't get in the way.

"Isn't our room that way?" she asked, gesturing down another path to their left.

Jack grinned, taking hold of her hand again. "I told you I want to show you something."

The paths he led them down were familiar enough to him he didn't worry about getting lost, though he hadn't walked them in a while. He normally flew, though now he wanted a few minutes to clear his head after what had just happened.

The further they went toward the center of the gardens, the more side paths they had to take. Everyone knew what was in the center of the garden, and how to get there. But it wasn't somewhere they went often. The paths were well maintained, but narrower the closer they got, until they had to walk single file, Jack leading, and finally turn sideways to slip through the hedge formed on either side by bushes bursting with large pink and purple flowers.

"I didn't get to show you much of Warren last time you were here," he said, as they neared the end of the path, which spilled into the heart of the garden. "I figured we'd start here."

They stepped passed the last of the bushes, like stepping over a threshold, into a field of flowers. The large white petals took on a silver hue, glowing in the light of the full moon.

"Jack, it's beautiful," she breathed, looking around at the hundreds of luminescent flowers that surrounded them like a sea. The translucent layers of her dress caught among the flowers, some of the lights shining through the fine threads until she seemed to be one more flower among them, a part of the field, the fabric glowing.

"How?" she asked, looking back at him.

"I'm not a botanist," he chuckled, leaning on his staff. "But they only glow under a full moon. That's why I wanted to bring you here tonight."

Their wedding, like most events on Warren, had been planned for the day of the full moon.

She took a few steps forward, looking around with wide green eyes, picking her way carefully among the flowers to avoid stepping on any of them.

Jack grinned, trailing behind her. The moonlight and the radiance from the flowers illuminated her in a luminous glow, shone through the layers of her dress and her veil, radiating off her cheeks and hair. And he was content just to follow her. This was a luxury hadn't

been allowed before: to just watch and admire, without worry of attack, or getting in trouble for letting his feelings show. She was small and lovely, and the light about her now was a reflection of the spiritual light she cast in his life.

And she had married him " that was almost beyond his comprehension, considering all the mistakes he had made in just the ten or so years that he remembered. He was content to be her moon, following her endlessly just to reflect her light, and protect her from the shadows.

A lunar moth rose from one of the flowers, incandescent silver dust trailing behind it as it fluttered around Rapunzel. She giggled, spinning back toward him to watch its flight as it rose higher above them. Some of the dust from its wings landed on her cheeks. Her nose twitched as the dust touched her skin, glittering in the moonlight.

Jack leaned on his staff watching, smiling.

"What did he say?" he asked, when their eyes met.

She smiled, coming back to meet him. "He welcomed me to Warren." She took his hands, with a gentleness that surprised him, and almost unnerved him. "He asked me to look after you " he said you've been through a great deal, and you deserve to be happy. What did he say to you?"

"'Welcome home.'" He reached up to touch the sweep of hair on her forehead. "And he told me to cherish you " that you're a light in an ever darkening galaxy. But I already knew that."

The glittering dust from the lunar moth was still on her cheeks. Combined with the moonbeams it was enough for him to see her blush as her eyes shied away. After a moment she looked back at him. "Did you?"

"The moment I saw you through the vent of that cell." He leaned in to kiss her forehead, then kissed the dust from her cheeks. "He also told me we have his blessing."

He pulled back before his lips could find his way to hers. "You ready to go in?"

She nodded.

He led her across the small field, to the hedge that bordered the other side, down another path toward the living quarters. Once the path widened out, and there was room enough to walk side-by-side, he wrapped an arm around her waist, kissing the top of her head.

It wasn't a long walk, and they didn't speak. Jack couldn't deny part of that might have been the nerves creeping back up on him as they headed toward their room.

"I'm curious to see what Cottontail painted on the door this time," Jack admitted. The hallway toward their room was silent save for their footsteps, and he spoke in a near whisper. He suspected the occupants of the nearby rooms were still in the banquet hall, or had arranged somewhere else to sleep tonight so the newlyweds would have

their privacy.

"Actually, he let me paint me it," Rapunzel said. He glanced down and saw her nervous smile.

They reached their doorway. Like his old door it was dark blue, with frost painted around the edges. In the top right corner was a three quarter moon, illuminated by the sun slightly below it and to the left, both in a star strewn sky. He crouched down to look at the lower half, where a frosted sun lily reached toward both of the celestial bodies.

He traced the delicate white ice crystals on the edge of the brilliant golden petals with .

"I was trying to draw something that represented how you make me feel," she admitted. When he glanced back she was rubbing her arm, looking to the side. "I thought about how, when you hold me, I feel like nothing that hurt me. So the frost on the flowerâ€" "

"â€"Represents me holding you," he finished, still tracing the fine lines of the picture.

"Mmhhh. "

Jack stood up slowly, turning back to her.

"Is it okay?" She was still look away, blushing and rubbing her arm as though afraid of rejection. He caught her hand, kissing her knuckles.

He tried to find words to tell her how much it meant to him, how it touched him. But he couldn't find them, of course. Even if he had, he wouldn't have been able to form them around the lump in his throat. Instead he caught her hand, kissing her knuckles. "Thank you" was all he could manage.

It wasn't enough, but she seemed to find it adequate, from the way she met his eyes, her smile returning. The strength of the emotions began to ease, and he grinned, reaching for the doorknob.

"Hang on. Hiccup told me about a custom from Berk that I actually like." He stepped through the doorway then reached back, picking her up by the waist and lifting her over the threshold. "Turns out Vikings are extremely superstitious â€" they think the bride tripping on the threshold is a bad omen, so they have the groom carry her to avoid it. It was one of the few customs he and Merida followed from either of their worlds when they got married."

"Where did they get married?" she asked.

"Long story for another time," he chuckled as he closed the door, turning on the light. "I couldn't do it justice right now."

On the circular table in the center of the room he saw the small box he had asked Phil to set there a couple days earlier. He hadn't doubted the yeti, but he was still glad to see it. Picking it up, he took her hand, leading her over to the bed. He was surprised to see the dark blue comforter, identical to the one in his old room, though

large enough to cover the bigger bed. He had expected her to choose a different color.

The room was fairly similar to his, with a white carpet, simple light stained wood furniture. Though the walls were white " he had already given her permission to use them as a canvas, so that wasn't much of a surprise.

"I have something for you," he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

She sat down as well (he was surprised how comfortable she seemed doing so, when his nerves had stepped up a notch). But she seemed perfectly at ease as she adjusted her hair and veil.

When she was situated, he held the box out to her. She accepted it, slowly lifting the lid.

"I tried to incorporate them into the ceremony, but with the hand binding, and my staff, Tooth and I couldn't figure out a way to make it work." He watched her fingers as she lifted the first layer of cushioning to reveal the two rings Hiccup had forged for them. "You didn't say anything, but when you told me about the custom I could tell it was important to you."

Rapunzel closed her eyes, one hand covering her mouth.

"I hope they're okay," he said, her reaction making him nervous. "Baby Tooth was disappointed she didn't get to be a ring bearer."

She giggled softly, picking up the rings to examine them. Hers was braided platinum, some of the metal worked into a leaf shape that formed the setting for an amethyst.

She held up his, a simple platinum band, pointing to the characters etched into the metal. "What does it say?"

"Loyalty," he said. "It's Warren's native language."

"Can you speak it?"

"It's required for all governors," he said.

"Will you teach me?" she asked, looking up at him excitedly.

Jack chuckled. "Not right \_now\_."

"I know," she said. "But will you?"

He nodded. "Sure. It will help me get used to it again."

"Will you say something in it?" she asked.

In the two months they'd been apart, he had almost forgotten how much the thought of learning anything new excited her. It was amazing to watch the way she lit up at the prospect of learning a language she might never use. Though she would probably use it to read all the old books in the back of the library.

"First things first," he said, taking the rings from her. "You said it was the left hand?"

She nodded.

Taking her left hand, he slipped the ring onto her finger. When it was in place he kissed the amethyst. When he let go of her hand she took his, sliding the band onto his finger as well, before mimicking his kiss. She sat back, smiling shyly, and he reached out to touch her cheek.

"Loyalty," he said, switching to the old tongue. "That's how you say it," he explained, when she looked at him curiously.

She repeated the word, her pronunciation slightly off. Jack chuckled and said it again, slower so she could catch the cadence. She tried again, slowly, as though tasting the syllables on her tongue. He nodded, and she smiled.

"That's what my vow comes down to," he said. "My loyalty to you."

"Will you say something else?"

"Our wedding night and you want to learn a language," Jack muttered, rolling his eyes. "Encouraging."

Rapunzel giggled, before the sound turned into full on laughter. She fell back, clutching her stomach as her laughter continued.

Jack watched her with a quirked brow for a moment before he chuckled as well. Then curiosity got the better of him. Reaching over he eased her hands away from her stomach, his fingers going to work at her sides, tickling her. Her laughter kicked up a notch, her body curling around his hands, rolling over in an attempt to get away from him. But he moved quickly, following her so she couldn't escape.

She reached up for his sides, her hands trying to slip past the edges of his unzipped jacket. But he grinned, swatting her hand away.

He stopped just before she started gasping for air. Taking off his jacket he tossed it on the floor before laying down beside her. While he waited for her breathing to return to normal, he unpinned her veil, sending it to join his jacket on the floor.

"Would you take my hair out too?" she asked, still giggling.

He nodded and sat up, going to work first at the end of the braid. He unwrapped the strands that covered the tie that held the braid in place. Some of the flowers had already fallen out, those that remained had already begun to wilt, so he cast those to the floor with her veil and his jacket.

"Are you nervous at all?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him once more, especially with the quivering in his own stomach and fingers. And from what he knew of it, their situations were normally reversed.

"A little," she said, watching as he began to undo the plaiting. "But I love you. And I trust you."

He was too floored by that to respond, so instead he focused on his work.

The main braid was fairly easy to undo " it was when he got to all the twists, the smaller braids and the decorations closer to the scalp it became more challenging. He had to find which braid to undo first, otherwise another one would get in the way.

"I don't think I've ever actually played with hair before," he admitted as she sat up to make his job easier. He grinned as he pulled out a string of small pearls and several of the braids were freed. He dropped the pearls to the floor.

"You're good at it, actually," she said.

"Maybe I had a sister before I got amnesia," he said. He combed his fingers through the hair he had just released, making sure there were no smaller braids hidden on the underside, or another strand of pearls. Rapunzel closed her eyes, leaning into his hand, clearly enjoying the motion. A few more braids, pearls and flowers and her hair was free. He smiled, combing his fingers through the golden strands. "I prefer it down."

"But you don't like it in the way," she reminded, as she turned back to face him.

"Only in life or death situations," he said. Inching closer, he kissed her, lips brushing hers.

She responded immediately, pressing into him, shifting so she could twine her arms around his neck. As with their kiss in the guest room on Corona he found himself getting lost quickly.

It was like when he broke through the surface of the pond " for a moment he lost himself in the cold air, the north wind and the snow. He forgot who he was for a moment, his mind melding with the elements of his territory. But as that began to fade, his brain remembering that he wasn't the ice, it gave way to confusion, his brain trying to figure out where he ended and where the ice began, until after another moment everything snapped back into place.

This was a sensation he didn't want to escape, though.

His lungs were not romantics, apparently, because eventually they demanded air, and he had to pull back. He could feel Rapunzel's warm breath fanning across his face as they both gasped for air.

"If you get too cold-

Her palm pressed against his cheek as she met his eyes. "Jack, please. I trust you."

"Just tell me, okay?"

"Okay," but the word was almost lost as she kissed him again.

And he was losing himself again, his mind losing clarity. He looped his arm around her waist. She squeaked against his lips as he lifted her easily, adjusting their position so they were closer to the head

of the bed.

Without breaking the kiss she pulled her body away from his, fingers finding their ways to the small clasps of his formal shirt. He helped her, glad to be rid of it. The fabric was uncomfortable against his skin " and now it was in the way. Eventually one of them got frustrated (he wasn't sure which), and pulled too hard at the delicate fabric. The sound of ripping threads made them both pull back, at first surprised. Then he grinned, and ripped the last part of the shirt, yanking to break through the hem, so he could remove it without working at the last few clasps.

By this point he was used to being shirtless around Rapunzel, he thought little of it as he added the shirt to the growing pile of discarded garments on the floor. He paused a moment to remove his gauntlet, setting it on the nightstand before turning back to her.

He caught her eyes roaming over his chest as he turned back to her, her cheeks a distinct hue of pink. When she realized he had caught her, the color darkened further.

"You're blushing?" he asked, blinking in surprised.

She turned away, cheeks now close to red, not meeting his eyes.

Jack touched her shoulder, turning her back to him. "Hang on. Rapunzel, you've seen more of me than any other woman " and you're blushing? I don't remember you blushing on Corona when your fingers were all over my scars."

"Th-that was different," she said. Their eyes met, and her breath hitched. "That wasn't" this."

He chuckled, stroking the side of her face again to coax her closer. "Have I mentioned that you're incredibly cute?"

"Not the word a woman wants to hear at a moment like this," she said, though he caught a teasing glint in her eyes.

"Adorable?" he tried, grin growing.

She rolled her eyes.

"Lovely?"

Her lips brushed his " but just a brush.

"Beautiful?"

That seemed to satisfy her, and she kissed him, pressed against him. And there was that feeling of floating again. Not like the wind or water " something warm and enveloping. A little like waking up without his powers. Not being woken up, but waking up because he was fully rested, wrapped in blankets that offered warmth and a feeling of safety.

She was so warm, her fingers tangling in his hair, and her breath filling his lungs. Or was that his warmth? It made no sense, he knew his body temperature was rising (still not quite to a normal human

temperature), but the warmth was undeniable, like she was leaving a trail of sunlight across his skin.

It helped him relax, letting go of the fear he might accidentally hurt her.

He pulled back from her lips, wanting to try another endearment. One hand was braced against the mattress, while the other was at her back, following the lacing of her dress in search of the ends.

"My wife," he whispered. A thrill of excitement surged through him as he said the word, realizing exactly what it meant â€" a moment he had prayed for, but given up hope for, that night they had fallen asleep in the guest room on Corona.

He didn't know how to describe her reaction, it wasn't physical save for a small gasp, but he still feltâ€| something â€" he guessed she felt the same thrill he did at the word.

"My husband," she said, voice breathless.

There went any last semblance of control he had.

He had found the end of the lacing of her dress and he pulled it, the bow giving way easily (a lot easier than some of her braids had).

Shifting their position again, he rolled over so her back was against the mattress and he hovered over her. One hand still pressed against the mattress, holding him up. His free hand went to caress the side of her face again.

After that, there were no more words.

The world fell away around them, until all he could think about, feel or see was Rapunzel. Her breathing. The beat of his heart â€" or was it hers? He began to suspect their hearts had merged at some point without him noticing; only one beat for both of them. It was like dying again, the way everything faded from the edges, as though the world were unraveling until all that was left were those few details he hung onto for dear life.

But there was the awareness even as he fell asleep later that he would wake up â€" and she would be by his side when he did.

## 20. Chapter 20

**\*\*I'm not sure how happy I am with this chapter (I ended up splitting it in two, so the ending might feel a bit sudden).\*\***

**\*\*As may become obvious pretty quickly â€" this is a flashback chapter, and the next few chapters will be the same. I wanted to give you guys some background on **\*\*\_\*\*The Nightfury Crew\*\*\_\*\*** (well, as you'll see, this is actually when they were the crew of **\*\*\_\*\*The Stormfly II\*\*\_\*\*** â€" but that will come up in a later chapter). I'm not going to cover the three or four years they were together, just highlight a few of the important dates (mainly in the Mericcup relationship). **\*\*****



**\*\*Remember back in chapter 14 when Jack was telling Rapunzel about his scars? If there are any of those stories you really want to see, let me know! I'm not sure exactly how much this will cover, I'm just going to see where it goes. So I'm open for your thoughts " and please be sure to let me know if you have any questions! I'm going to try and work out a timeline that I'll post on my tumblr (songofafreeheart, in case you're interested) to establish the character's ages, and when everything happened.\*\***

**\*\*This chapter starts just as Jack's time at the Imperial Flight Academy is coming to an end " about a year and a half after he left Warren (so he's 19), about 4 years before he meets Rapunzel.\*\***

**\*\*Meanwhile " my second space battle! (Even if it is just a mock battle/exercise.)\*\***

**\*\*Dedicated to HerheadinthecLOUDs, who once mentioned she wanted to see Jack being a snot at the Academy. This probably isn't what she had in mind, but still. (And I don't care if you don't ship Rainbow Snowcone " go read her story \*\_\*\*Project GUARDIAN: The Rise and Fall\*\*\_\*. It is amazing, and fun, and every person who likes RotG needs to read it. End of story.)\*\***

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 20\_

Space had lost the ability to calm him. He didn't know when the change had happened, only that it had. And it unnerved him, to have his last safe haven stripped away from him. There had been others " but he had given them up when he had left Warren. And that was a decision he couldn't take back, much as he was starting to regret it. Bunnymund had made that clear.

Jack grimaced and pushed that thought away, hands tightening around the yoke of his one man fighter.

The flight instructor was speaking through his ear piece, addressing the two teams of students taking part in the exercise.

"I don't think I need remind you this is your last test as cadets," he was saying. "As such, it is your last chance to prove yourself, or raise your grade. For those of you who have not yet received a commission with the Imperial Fleet, this will be your last chance to catch the attention of someone with an available commission."

Jack rolled his eyes, trying not to dwell on that thought.

"You all know the rules by now," the instructor went on. "Do the Academy, and the Empire, proud."

The communication ended, and the twenty-four fighters took their places on the arena marked out with space buoys that created a grid of red light so the boundaries were clear. It was synched up with the light on Jack's dash (and on the other fighters). On the Imperial Carrier just beyond the arena, overlooking the arena, the instructor would flip the switch that would turn on the lights green.

Jack kept one eye on that light as he double checked his computers

and engine functions one last time. All were finely tuned from the several hours he had spent working on them the night before. Not that they needed much work. He spent more time on his fighter than any of the other cadets, and he had needed something to do with his time. He had never been good in social arenas, even less so with his peers in the Academy.

This was a different arena though â€" and a different matter entirely.

The light on the dash changed to green.

The game was simple. Avoid getting hit, and take out as many of the opposing team as you could. It tested flight skill, hand-eye coordination, tactical skill and combat skills. Jack had scored highest of the class the first time they had done the exercise at the beginning of their training a year and a half earlier, and he had only gotten better.

His earpiece buzzed with his teammate's strategy. Jack half paid attention â€" but an opposing fighter had already started toward him.

Checking his shields, he prepped for evasive maneuvers. Their shots were limited, so it was best to preserve them as long as possible. It wasn't a life or death situation, and he preferred to fly anyway. That was what he had come to the Academy to learn. Not to become one more Imperial drone answering to the will of a narcissistic empress with no regard for life, whether human or alien.

Right now he refused to think about the price he had paid to get here in the first place. And for what?

No. He wouldn't think about it.

He swung his fighter wide to get out of the fighter's path. There were several other fighters behind him â€" if his attacker were looking for a fight he could find it with one of them.

He started to relax. But his sensors indicated the other fighter â€" Red 2, if he was reading the markings on its side correctly â€" had shifted course to follow him.

"You gotta be kidding me," Jack muttered. His open comm would have caught it, but it was lost among the other chatter on the Grey Team channel.

He dropped the fighter into a nose dive, almost straight down, ignoring the G-forces that crushed him into his seat. Just before reaching the bottom of the arena he leveled out and swerved to his right. His brain received a letter of complaint for his stomach, but it was disregarded.

His tail was still close behind, though faltering with the sudden changes. Red 2 had skill, Jack would give him that. But only that.

He made a sharp upward turn.

Red 2's reaction was quick, turning up as well.

Jack drove his fighter into the midst of the mock battle, where most of the ships were now engaged. He slipped behind an enemy fighter "Red 5" narrowly avoiding a bolt from another opponent. Instead it hit the fighter he ducked around. Red 5's shields rippled as they absorbed the hit.

The blasters were harmless. But the hull sensors kept track of each hit, and the computer calculated the damage that would have been caused, creating a similar affect on the ship. Once your shields were destroyed you flew defenseless. If you received what would have been a fatal hit your engines went dead, all but life-support shutting down until the exercise ending.

Jack flew right up to the edge of the arena before pulling up again, the belly of his fighter skimming the boundary. If your ship strayed beyond the light grid formed by the buoys you were disqualified. He had never been disqualified in this exercise, and he had no intention of breaking that record.

"This is Grey 4," a voice said through the comm. "I could use a little help!"

Jack twisted his fighter back toward the battle, eyes scanning the area for Grey 4. He found her nearby, tagged by two members of the red team.

"Got it." He locked first on one, taking quick but careful aim and firing. The computer chimed that it had been a direct hit. He fired again, to do as much damage as possible before it could break free of his targeting lock.

Each was a direct hit. He didn't need the computer to tell him the fighter's shields should be down. He fired one last time "just as the fighter swerved out of the way, and his targeting computers lost the lock. The shot sailed harmlessly to the end of the arena before fading away.

"Blast!"

Each fighter had fifteen shots, and he had just used up three of them "the last a complete waste.

Grey 4 turned toward the fighter he had missed and fired, the shot dead center on the engines.

"Thanks, Jack."

He nodded, forgetting that she couldn't see it. Lost in the fact for a moment that he had no idea who she was beside her ship assignment, yet she knew his first name. Shaking that off, he scanned his surrounding to gage his best course of action.

A red team fighter bore down on his from the right. He saw the blaster cannons flash, and accelerated forward to avoid the shot. It passed behind him, but not harmlessly. It hit another red team fighter, which immediately wen dread in the air.

He dove back into the fray to lose the fighter that had turned to follow him "Red 2. Okay, he would have to give him persistence as

well as skill.

Jack swerved this way and that, avoiding fire from enemies as well as teammates now he was in the thick of the fight. One shot landed thought, and he grimaces as the computer's feminine voice informed him his shields were down seventy-five percent.

He would take the wind's incessant, childlike questions over the computer any day.

"Some blows are unavoidable," Bunnymund has taught him. "Don't waste time regrettin' it, and don't panic â€" that'll leave ya open for another. Keep movin'."

He had tried to block the words out when he had first fotten to the Academy. But he'd learned quickly the value of what he already knew. Even without a staff, or the wind or the ice, all those lessons had worth â€" even more so now he had nothing else to fall back on.

"You're in the way, Frost!" someone snapped through his earpiece. "Which side are you on?"

\_Grey, unfortunately,\_ he thought. The side that usually lost. After a while, the efo boost of being the last man from his team standing had given way to annoyance. They did win â€" thirty-six percent of the time, according to the score cards â€" but it didn't make him any less annoyed with his assigned team.

Turning back to the mock battle field, Jack looked at the nine remaining members of Grey Team, and the levent red. Didn't Grey 1 ever get tired of shouting out strategies that only worked twenty precent of the time? Hopefully his commission wouldn't require him to be in tactical situations.

Another Red Team fighter, Red 10, passed him â€" his sensors indicating at the fighter's shields were disabled. Taking aim he fired, and Red 10 went dead. Two â€" no, three down. Nine to do. If this was his last test at the Academy, he would really rather win, even if it had to be in spite of his teammates.

His sensors beeped.

In spite of Red 2 as well, apparently.

Jack pulled away from the rest of the Grey Team, swerving away from the other fighters â€" but Red 2 followed.

"Frost, can't you stick with your team for once?" Grey 1 shouted through the comm.

"Tell that to the jerk on my tail," Jack muttered, cringing at the level of sound right in his ears with his sensitive hearing. Other than that he disregarded the communication as he flew around the arena, Red 2 still on his tail. Again, the pilot was good. Good enough to keep up with Jack's maneuvers without too much difficulty. But it wasn't Jack's ego that told him his opponent wasn't up to his skill level. Not quite. If he had to guess, the difference was that his opponent just wasn't as finely attuned to the inner workings of his ship.

Jack smirked. He'd never understood why his peers were so eager to leave the repairs of their fighters to mechanics and droids. They seemed to think he was an overachiever or a teacher's pet for handling all his own repairs, above and beyond what was required. But he enjoyed it. And North taught him the only way to fly a ship well was to know it. And the only way to know a ship required being aware of every detail, from how it was built to the exact state of its engines.

Red 2 didn't have that intimacy with his fighter " or the benefit of North's teachings " but he was still a good pilot.

Jack decided he might as well have a little fun, as long as he was here. The way things were going, it might be all he got out of this.

He kept to the edges of the arena, giving the mock battle a berth, and pulling out all the stops when it came to his flight path.

As he tilted the fighter on its side and curved back around, his shoulders relaxed. It was the first time he'd had any kind of freedom in more than a year and a half. A slow grin spread as he lifted the nose of his fighter upward.

It was after a round about lap around the arena that Jack's grin slipped.

"Why aren't you firing?" he asked under his breath, watching the fighter behind him on one of the computer screens. It was possible Red 2 had used up all his shots " but Jack's instinct told him that wasn't the case. And much as the Imperial instructors said otherwise, his instinct was one of the few things he trusted.

As he tried to figure it out, his thought were momentarily distracted. He miscalculated and the arc of his flight path took him too close to the battle. A stray shot hit his wing, close to the body. The fighter shuddered.

"Shields are functioning at ten percent and dropping," the computer said. "Now at seven percent."

He dodged another shot, gritting his teeth. Tooth with feint in horror if she knew.

"Now operating at-" it cut itself off as it dropped again. "Now operating at four percent."

"Shut. Up." Jack ground out between his teeth. The shields were useless after twenty percent anyway. The glanced at the indicator screen that tracked the rest of the fighters in relation to his own position.

Two reds, including the one behind him, and he was the fourth grey. He was almost impressed with his team. The other three were teaming up on one of the reds. He had to take out Red 2 now, before one of his teammates tried to be helpful.

Lifting the nose of his fighter again, he headed toward the top of the arena, keeping a close on on Red 2 on the screen. His smirk

returned as he saw the enemy fighter. He decreased his speed, letting his opponent close inâ€¦

Just as Red 2 entered easy firing range, Jack flipped the ship back toward his opponent. When the ship was right side up, Jack pulled the trigger, firing three successive shots straight at Red 2, aiming for the shields. The second bolt killed the shields. Jack shifted his aim to the fuel chambers. The hit was slightly off â€" his aiming had been sloppy. But had it been a real battle, it still would have been close enough it would have caused the fighter to explode.

Jack smirked.

#

A few hours later they were back in the Imperial Flight Academy Headquarters on Pallash I.

Jack hadn't planned to check the score from the exercise. And he had no social life, so when he heard his datapad chime to alert him to a new message, he didn't even bother to look up from the bolts he was tightening on the underbelly of his fighter, one last time. There wasn't much point working on the fighter â€" after tonight it wasn't even his. It would be handed over to the mechanics, who would do a full system analysis and prepare it for the next student who would receive it at the start of the next semester in a few weeks.

But once he had finished the few miniscule changes (he has tuned it up the night before, after all), curiosity got the better of him. Curiosity would always be his greatest weakness, he had realized long ago. He sighed in frustration as he wiped his hands on his dark grey, Academy issue flight suit, and went to pick up the datapad he had left near his tool kit. A few deft flicks of his fingers over the screen brought up his messages, and he opened the newest message. His score, as predicted.

And the numbers were also exactly what he had predicted. His flight scores were perfect, his aim exceeded expectations, his tactics were closer to exceeds expectations than passing. His teamwork, however, was non-existent â€" even worse than usual.

At the end of the message was a note that he would receive his final evaluation the next day.

Jack glared down at the datapad in his hand. He had the strong urge to throw it against a nearby wall, but resisted. Though in his mind he pictured it shattering against the durasteel wall of the hanger bay, and the thought was satisfying â€" though it left him with a stronger desire for the real thing.

He closed his eyes, trying to call on the calming techniques Sandy had taught him. They helped â€" to a point. But he found himself left with the desire for snow and a few of Bunnymund's mint chocolate eggs. But neither were an option at the moment. He had no access to anything on Warren, let alone any of Bunnymund's precious chocolate. Jack hadn't even realized how much he liked the stuff until his access was cut off.

And he had made that choice himself. That thought just strengthened his desire to hurl the datapad at the wall.

He seriously contemplated it. It was military issue, so he would have to pay if he ruined itâ€| but after tonight it wouldn't make much difference.

But before he could finish that thought the commlink on his belt chirped. He grimaced. He'd expected to be left alone now classes were over. He glanced at it out of habit â€" as a cadet he wasn't allowed to ignore a call, in case it was a commanding officer.

"Cadet Frost," he said, hitting the button on the side to accept the communication.

"Cadet, you've been summoned to the Imperial Palace. Report there within the hour.

"The \_palace\_?" he asked, too stunned to bite it back. "Why?"

"It's not your place to question an order, Cadet," the officer said. "It's your job to \_follow\_ them. Report to the palace in your formal uniform."

"Yes sir," he sighed.

\*\*I'm debating if I should tell you who Red 2 is, or hang onto that tidbit for later in the storyâ€|\*\*

\*\*I am starting to feel that my chapters should be longer, though. Your thoughts? And don't forget to let me know if you want to see any of the stories from chapter 14, with the other Disney Princesses.\*\*

## 21. Chapter 21

\*\*Just found out I don't qualify for the job I really wanted â€" which means I'm back to basics. XP I'm going to take out my frustrations by typing up this chapter. \*\*

\*\*Okay. So, remember when Jack was talking to King Thomas in chapter 17, and he mentioned he spent twenty minutes in the same room with Gothel, and left with his head in knots? Well, I was talking to Eva Marvex about it, and the more we talked, the more I knew the scene had to be written. Originally Eva was going to write it for me, and she got some of it done. When I read the page or so she had, I realized I wanted to write the scene myself (ironic, I know), and then I decided to just do this whole flashback arc. \*\*

\*\*So, this chapter is dedicated to Eva. I also have to thank her, because I borrowed some of her phrasing and elements from the bit she wrote.\*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 21\_

The Imperial palace, on Pallash I, rose above all the other buildings in the cityscape of the planet's capital cit. He'd heard it was an architectural marvel â€" but the only thing Jack noticed about it was the sheer size. It glinted in the evening sun like a gaudy jewel. The

walkway up to the entrance was long, mostly flat, with several sets of long, shallow steps. Tall, intimidating statues lined the way, holding bronze spears at attention. There was probably some meaning behind the wraith like figures, but Jack didn't know it. He didn't really care, either. And he could guess the long walk was meant to be awe-inspiring " but he found the whole thing ridiculous.

Transparisteel doors slid open, black armored troopers flanking each side, blaster rifles in hand. A shiver ran down Jack's spine as he passed them, doing his best to keep his gaze straight ahead, though his instinct was to eye them warily. They didn't seem to like anyone looking at them the wrong way, though.

Still, it was a relief to step through the door, out of the unrelenting sun and into the air conditioned lobby of the palace. For some the cool air might have been too extreme. To Jack, it was the only comfort he had at the moment. It washed over him, sinking through the layers of his dress uniform to sooth his heated skin like a balm.

Sterile smelling air assaulted him from the moment he stepped through the doors, as he approached the front desk. The durasteel and grease of the hanger bay was infinitely preferable in his opinion.

The formal uniform was not helping at all. The black fabric was still, and itchy against his arms, which were bare beneath the sleeves of his jacket. If there was anything in the galaxy that could make formal clothing bearable, he had yet to find it.

Four stories above him was the angled ceiling, all corners and jutting angles. Flags bearing the Imperial Crest hung from horizontal angles, longer than Jack was tall.

The floor was marble, the walls a mix of marble and dark stained wood. Sounds bounced off the unyielding stone, tossed back and forth like a child's ball; everything from murmured conversations, footfalls, and the splash of the fountain in the center of the lobby.

There wasn't much time for him to dwell on any of the details, though. A man in the burgundy uniform of the royal guard intercepted him several yards from the front desk. "Cadet Frost?"

Jack nodded.

"This way." The guard gestured to the turbo lifts on one side of the lobby.

Jack followed wordlessly, ten thousand questions swirling in his mind. But even if he could have figured out how to word them, he knew the guard wouldn't answer them anyway. It wasn't worth the effort.

They rode the turbolift in silence, Jack's heard pounding a little harder with each level the indicator light ticked off. He kept his hands clasped loosely behind his back, fighting every muscle in his body that pleaded with him for some kind of movement.

Taking a deep breath, he looked out through the transparisteel walls



of the lift, at the city fast falling away beneath them. His eyes followed lines of air traffic, speeders and shuttles of all makes and models crisscrossing in mid-air, , high above the skyscrapers, or coming in to land at various docking pads and hanger bays.

Finally, after what felt like hours to Jack, the turbolift came to a stop on the top floor, the doors sliding open. Jack followed the guard down the long black and burgundy hallway (why did the burgundy wall paper look like crushed velvet?), his boots silent on the short, dark grey carpet as they approached the only office on the level.

Jack swallowed as his fears for his destination for his destination were confirmed. Even his curiosity's repeated question of "why?" did nothing to eclipse his anxiety.

They reached the door and the guard tapped the door comm with his black gloved hand. "Your Majesty, Cadet Frost is here."

"Send him in." That voice had become too familiar in his year and a half on Pallash I.

His anxious heartbeat raked up a notch. He couldn't think of any scenarios where this could be a good thing. Not that he could think of any reason why he was here in the first place.

The door slid open, allowing him in the office of Empress Gothel.

The woman herself was just rising from her seat behind the large wooden desk, her arms draped in yards of dark fabric, crimson painted lips pulled in a smile as she looked him over.

"You certainly took your time." Her tone was honey sweet, but there was a barb behind it. He suspected that honey was venomous, and decided he would rather stay as far from it as possible. "You must think the ruler of a galactic empire has all the time in the universe."

"Hardly, Your Majesty," he said, reminding himself to stand at attention and at least act as though he respected the woman in front of him. "I just returned from a flight exercise - my commanding officer insisted I change into my dress uniform."

\_Do you realize what you're saying?\_ His mind asked. He was talking to a woman he had been raised to regard as an enemy, forcing himself to pretend he respected her, aware that he was required to submit to her orders. He had chosen that "as well as attending a military academy that forced him into uniforms that were varying degrees of uncomfortable. He hated uniforms of every kind. He also did not like commanding officers. He didn't like military ranking, and he didn't like people being in command over him.

He had left a life of hoodies, snowballs and fun times, where he had friends and a home, an \_ice palace\_ that was his, a wolf pack that was required by spiritual law to listen to him, and the closest thing to a family that he would probably ever know "and he had left it of his own free will. Jack was coming to the conclusion that he was a complete idiot.

"Ah." She chuckled as she sashayed around the desk, fingers trailing along the edge of the red stained wood. Her green eyes looked him over carefully "and he tried not to imagine her gaze left a slimy residue. "Well, neither of you can be faulted for that."

Jack frowned, not understand what she meant. He watched warily as she walked over to the kitchenette, pulling down two glasses and what looked like fire flower wine. He guessed, at least, from the flower on the label, which he was fairly sure he had seen somewhere before, though he had little experience with alcohol of any kind.

"Would you care for a drink?" she asked, uncorking the bottle with a violent pop.

"No, thank you, Your majesty."

"Are you sure?" she tipped the bottle, vermillion liquid splashing into the clear glass before she lifted it quickly, cutting off the flow and glanced back at him. "Ah, forgive me. I forgot that you don't drink."

Jack inhaled sharply at that bit of knowledge. Some things she might know from his file, which she no doubt had access to "but that was not one of them. He had no idea what was going on, and it just made the whole situation worse. He hated being in the dark.

She hummed, taking a sip from her glass before she sashayed back to her desk, wide hips rising and falling dramatically with each step. It was a move her recognized from observing other cadets. Her heels clicked on the hard wood floor.

"Tell me, Jack " have you received your commission in the Imperial Fleet yet?"

"No, Your Majesty." Most of his peers had, even those he exceeded when it came to overall scores. He wasn't sure how to feel, unsure if he wanted a place in the military or not. Considering the growing itch his uniform was starting on the inside of his left elbow, he was leaning toward 'no'. Though from here, he really didn't have anywhere to go.

Gothel had reached the desk again, taking another sip of her wine as she pushed aside a few papers on the surface to pick up a folder with the Imperial Flight Academy logo emblazoned on the front.

"Your file," she smiled, holding it up for him to see before setting down her wine glass to open the folder. The way her eyes ran over the page told him she had already read it and knew exactly what she was looking for "this was all a show for his sake. "And your final evaluation" Ah! Here it is. Let's see" 'Cadet Frost is rash, displays an inability to function as part of a team, has no sense of responsibility and lack's proper respect for authority.' In short: You're one of the best pilots the Academy has ever have the privilege of producing; your tactical skills are noteworthy" but you don't play well with others, and you have a habit of disregarding orders."

Jack wanted to say that the Academy had not "produced" him. Fine-tuned, maybe. But he was not a product of the Empire.

Everything else was accurate, though " enough so that he cringed as she spoke. Maybe he shouldn't be so surprised that he hadn't received a commission. Never mind that the orders he had disregarded were for maneuvers he knew wouldn't work; or that he always succeeded when he did breakaway. But no one ever acknowledged when his unorthodox moves were a success. That was beside the point when it came to the military. He had learned that officers did not like being proved wrong " especially not by cadets.

Warren had prepared him as a pilot. But they had taught him to think and strategize, not just follow text book flight maneuvers and blindly follow ill advised orders.

"Even with your short comings, there were several ships willing to overlook your rebellious streak in favor of your piloting skills." Gothel closed the folder and tossed it back on the desk with a \_smack\_ that resounded in Jack's ears. "But I had already flagged your folder."

Jack blinked, staring at the empress as he tried to understand what he had just been told. His final evaluation made sense. Everything beyond that led him into a deeper state of bafflement. He continued to go over her works in his mind, analyzing and cross analyzing them until his brain felt like a snake trying to eat its own tail. And he had to ask: "Why?"

Gothel sat on the edge of her desk, legs crossed at the knees. She paused midway through a sip of wine, and her lips pulled in a predatorily smile.

"Because you're not a drone," she said, setting her glass down with unnecessary care and stood up. She smoothed her skirt and came closer to where he stood in the middle of the office. "You caught my attention some months ago, Jackson."

He came to the quick conclusion he didn't like it when she said his name. It felt like a violation of some kind, and produced the sudden desire to take a shower to wash off the honey like residue of her voice that coated his skin and threatened to make him gag in disgust.

She continued to come closer, then vanished into his peripheral, circling behind his back. Closer, closer, too close.

It wasn't respect or training that kept his spine straight, of his hands clasped at the small of his back. But rather it was wariness. Because his every instinct screamed that there was a predator behind him, and he should no sooner let her out of his sight than he would a growling cougar. Still he knew that movements, just to turn his head and look back, would encourage her.

Everything he knew about Gothel told him she was vain. From the mirrors on the walls, to her tailored dress meant to accent every carefully manufactured curve, her immaculate black hair and manicure, down to the sway of her hips that he guessed was intended to attract his gaze. She wanted attention, so it was best not to give it to her.

That wasn't easy when every sense screamed at him that he was turning

his back on a threat.

"Last year, when Ambassador Naveen's daughter was kidnapped," she went on. "You defied orders to stay out of the way, and stole a speeder from the palace hanger. Not only did you save the girl, but the chase was absolutely breathtaking!" She said the last word in a breathless voice, apparently for dramatic emphasis.

\_Breathtaking,\_ Jack thought wryly. She had no idea.

She had probably been sitting in this office, watching out her window, or the skycam footage the news had broadcast. She hadn't been battling the G forces that had threatened to tear him and the speeder apart that night.

When he had heard about the kidnapped girl, he hadn't even stopped to consider following the official orders for everyone to stay back and let the police do their job. He had taken one look at the situation and known that girl didn't have a chance if someone didn't step in. A child deserved better than that.

He had already been near the palace, though he could never remember why, and he had taken the fastest, most agile speeder he could find (it had been idling on the edge of the walk up to the palace while the concierge had stared open mouthed, not in the hanger bay as Gothel had said) and he hadn't even considered that he was technically stealing in his haste. He had pushed the speeder to its limits, first to catch up with the fleeing kidnappers, then to survive everything they had done in their effort to lose him. He still had nightmares about a speeder bud bearing strait down on him. Only fast thinking has gotten him to the side of the bus tunnel before it crashed into him, though he had scraped the belly of the speeder on the wall, and the ceiling against the bus as it had sped by.

Flying through the power plant hadn't been much fun eitherâ€|

But he had gotten the young girl back to her parents â€" that had made it all worthwhile. Ambassador Naveen and his wife had paid for the speeder, and Jack had slipped back to the Academy before the press managed to get their hands on him. Though not before someone had recognized him and mentioned it to the officials. (He suspected he knew who it was, but could never confirm the guess.)

"I saw you fly around the palace, and nearly stayed up the whole night re-watching the skycam footage."

The press hadn't gotten their hands on him â€" but they had played the footage so many times even he had gotten sick of watching it while he'd been under confinement in his dorm room while they decided his punishment for all the orders he had broken that night. (Starting with the fact that he wasn't supposed to leave the Academy that night in the first place.)

"When I found out you were a cadet, I knew I had to keep an eye on your training." She came around, and spun to face him. The hem of her skirt flared dramatically, and her smirk told him she had done it on purpose. "Or did you really think those charges vanished on their own?"

Jack grimaced inwardly as he realized he should have looked into that. Instead, he had been too relieved at the thought that he wouldn't be expelled. A stupid, amateur mistake â€" North and Bunnymund had trained him better than that.

She withdrew a datadisk from the folder â€" the skycam footage he guessed.

"You didn't learn to fly like that in the Academy," she said. "Skill like that doesn't belong in the fleet, slaving your way up through the ranks."

Considering the itch inside his elbow was bordering on unbearable, he was inclined to agree with her on that. When she turned back toward her desk for a moment, he reached over to try and scratch through the black fabric. It didn't help much. If anything, it seemed to make it worse.

Typical.

She turned back to him, and he dropped his hand back to his side. Gothel caught the movement, one dark eyebrow quirking in what looked like amusement.

"I certainly wouldn't mind having you as my personal pilot," she said. "If you prefer a one-man fighter, I can make room for you in my guard. I'm open to negotiations, if there's another position you would prefer."

She was behind him again, hands on his shoulders, thumbs kneading the muscles that connected his neck and shoulders. A motion that was intended to relax the muscles. But at the moment it only made him tense further.

"So long as your potential isn't wasted, Jackson," she said, leaning close to his ear.

His instincts of self-preservation shrugged his shoulders to escape her hands and he stepped forward without thinking. He turned to face her, in time to see her green eyes narrow, her entire expression darkening. His initial impression of a predator came back full force. Except now her fangs were bared at the perceived offense. Never mind that she had been the one to invade his personal space.

"You don't have many other options, Jack," she said, voice now low and dangerous. "Pilot of a merchant freighter? Please. You're too flamboyant for that."

That word. Everyone accused him of flamboyancy. It tended to get him in trouble, though he wasn't entirely sure what they meant.

Gothel stalked back to her desk (he was glad her thinly veiled attempts at seduction were gone). Picking up the folder, she held it out to him.

He accepted it, looking at the Academy logo, and wondered why he had made the choice that brought him here. He had run from his responsibilities as a Governor, and now he would beâ€¦ what?

Sighing, he turned and left the office, not sparing a glance for the guard still stationed outside the door as he headed for the turbolift.

#

The Crood's Diner was located near the middle class docking bay, and had become one of Jack's frequent haunts during his free time (or whenever he needed to get away from the Academy). It was one of the cleaner establishments, the food was edible, and the large windows offered an unparalleled view of the ships that came in to land.

While his peers hit the clubs and casinos in the higher end of the city, Jack came to see what he could learn from the pilots that came through the all edges of the galaxy " both in terms of piloting and galactic news. He wasn't interested in the holonet that was controlled by Gothel and her henchmen. Occasionally he would mention Warren to hear the debates it would start over details pertaining to rumors that were a far cry from the truth to begin with.

For now it was mostly empty, only two others aside from Jack himself. He sat at his favorite booth near the counter, legs extended over the bench with his back pressed against the window. His feet rested on the duffle bag that held everything he owned. His uniforms he'd left hanging in the closet of the dorm room. He had kept the boots, though. Those were comfortable, as far as shoes went. On his left forearm he wore the gauntlet that had been north and Toothiana's goodbye present. He had worn it whenever he was out of uniform, and the familiar weight might not offer the same comfort his staff would have, but it comforted him none the less.

Bored of the help wanted ads he was skimming through on his datapad, he glanced back over his shoulder when his peripheral caught sight of movement in the sky beyond the window. He watched as what looked like a Berk Nadder 10-21 came in for a land. It was medium blue, with red and orange detailing. Beautiful, like any Berk design. If Jack could get a job piloting that, or a ship like it, he certainly wouldn't mind.

At the moment, though, the only think going anywhere was the glass of juice he had ordered with his meal, which the waitress was refilling " again.

"Thanks, Eep," he said, running a hand over his eyes.

"No problem."

At some point he had been added to the list of regulars her father actually liked, so he received refills for free " which was certainly coming in handy at the moment.

He took a drink of the juice before he turned back to his datapad and gave up. Instead he turned his attention to his plate of food. If he wanted to get a job as a pilot, then he would need to actually get out and pound the pavement, talking to the pilots that were refueling.

He turned his attention to his plate of food. If he couldn't find a job, he couldn't afford to waste a meal.

He was just finishing off his meal when a chime indicated the arrival of another customer. Jack glanced up at the door as much from habit and curiosity as to maintain personal security.

The newcomer was about his own age, probably a couple years older. Jack couldn't resist quirking an eyebrow as he noticed a small braid in the dark brown hair, which was otherwise tousled. He seemed intent on keeping his right temple covered with his bangs. Bright green eyes scanned the diner before he took a seat at the counter.

Jack watched from the corner of his eyes as Eep took the newcomer's order.

As soon as she left to take the order to the kitchen, where her father and brother were the cooks, the brunet's shoulders sagged, and he rubbed his forehead.

Jack looked back at his plate, trying to bite it back but he knew the question would come out. So after a moment he looked back at the counter and asked: "You okay?"

The brunet glanced back over his shoulder, clearly not sure if he was the one Jack was talking to. Their eyes met briefly and he nodded, running a hand through his hair.

"Yeah. Fine. Just wish someone had told me that people don't hire a ship when the captain is the only crew member I might not have become a ship-for-hire." He shrugged. "Other than that, I'm fine."

Jack chuckled. "That's up in the air. I was told not to do something and I did it anyway. Now I'm stuck here."

The brunet chuckled dryly, turning his stool so he faced Jack's booth. He held up his glass of water in a mock toast. "To messing up?"

Jack raised his own glass in agreement, smirking as they both took a sip. "Care to join me?"

"Sure." He left the stool and slid into the seat across from Jack at the booth, with his glass of water in his left hand. He extended his right hand. "I'm Hiccup."

"Just Hiccup?"

"Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III" but that's a bit of a mouthful."

Jack tried not to laugh as he reached out and shook Hiccup's hand. "Jack Frost."

"Nice to meet you."

"You wouldn't happen to be in need of a pilot, could you?" Jack asked. "Or a mechanic? I'm not picky at the moment."

"Right now I need someone I can call a crew," Hiccup shrugged. "If I can, I have some freight I can haul out tonight. Provided you don't

have any prior engagements."

"Nothing that can't be cancelled," Jack said with a shrug. The Academy graduation ceremony was the next day, but missing that didn't really seem like that big of a deal. And getting as far away from Gothel as possible was certainly appealing.

Hiccup leaned back, considering Jack as he took a drink of water. "Can you pilot a Berk Nadder 10-21?"

For a moment, all Jack could do was stare at him, going over the words in his mind to make sure he hadn't misheard. But how many Berk Nadder 10-21s could there be in one port at any time â€" even on a planet that had as much traffic as Pallas I?

Apparently Tsar Lunar hadn't forgotten him, even all the way in this part of the galaxy.

"If it's built for humans, I can pilot it," he said, unable to bite back a smile. Not a smirk, but a smile. He had almost forgotten with a smile felt like.

Hiccup looked at him, considering again, then smiled in return, holding out his hand again. "Welcome to the crew of \_The Stormfly II\_, Jack Frost."

\*\*Jack is now a member of Hiccup's crew. Merida will come next chapter â€" as will the story of why the ship has the name it does (i.e. a little more about Hiccup's backstory). Though I think some of you can probably guessâ€| \*\*

## 22. Chapter 22

\*\*In case you were under the delusion that this story was planned out (excuse me while I laugh myself senseless), I had to change what was said in chapter 6 about Hiccup and Merida's pasts. (I've gone back and changed the chapter, for people reading the story after this chapter is posted.) For Merida, I didn't want her to be princess of a whole planet, so I named her home after Ancient Scotland â€" Caledonia. \*\*

\*\*Hiccup's was a bit more complicated â€" and the reason I had to change about chapter 6. His backstory is summarized here, so you don't need to go back and reread chapter 6. But I realized I couldn't fit the dragons into the story I have in mind, so those got cut. I've heard that Alvin the Treacherous is a part of \*\*\_\*\*Riders of Berk\*\*\_\*\*, but I'm going off Alvin from the books (his mother really is a crazy witch â€" she would be hilarious if she wasn't so evil). Despite the lack of dragons, Hiccup has grown up having adventures that have brought him in contact with Alvin, who is still his nemesis. I don't have time (or interest) to go into it, but I think that's all you really need to know. \*\*

\*\*This chapter almost made me cry several times while I was working on it. So, please be warned. Especially if you like Astrid.  
\*\*

\_Among The Stars\_



## Chapter 22

"I'm starting to think this isn't natural," Jack muttered, glaring out at the fog beyond the Stormfly II's viewport.

They were docked on a landing pad in DunBroch, the capital city of the Highlands territory on the planet Caledonia. The landscape was all rolling green hills, endless forests blazing with the colors of early autumn, and a shimmering, steel grey lake. The landing pad was in the shadow of an ancient stone fortress, on the cliff that rose from one side of the lake. It was no longer used as a fortress, but it was still home to the royal family. And, while a well-aimed ship's plasma cannon could easily have obliterated it, it was still impressive, so the symbolism remained.

Not that Jack or Hiccup could see either the fortress or the landscape at the moment. Just as they had prepared to take off after they delivered their cargo, the night mist had thickened until even the hull lights couldn't cut through. So they were stuck on the ground until it was safe to take off.

"It's condensation caused by an extremely moist atmosphere," Hiccup said with a shrug. "it rained earlier, and there's a lake right over there. What's unnatural about that?"

Jack grinned dryly as he shook his head. He had been the pilot of The Stormfly II for six months, and he had come to consider Hiccup a close friend. But he'd learned that Hiccup was, if nothing else, practical. If it didn't come down to an equation of scientific fact, he had trouble understanding it. He understood instinct only to a point, and had no idea how to let go and follow a hunch with no explanation or proof. And, Jack had learned, Hiccup didn't get that nagging sensation at the back of his mind that always seemed to land him right where he needed to be. (Though Jack was coming to conclusion that right where he needed to be was usually in the middle of trouble.)

Living on Warren, Jack had learned that not everything made sense, and to trust his gut when it told him something was wrong. And something about the fog was off. It didn't feel malicious. But it was covering something up.

"Look, your whole sixth sense thing might not make sense," Hiccup said. "But you've gotten us out of enough touch spots. If we need to take off blindâ€" "

Jack shook his head. "No, I don't think we're in trouble. Not this time. Something's going on; we just have to wait it out."

"If you say so."

"Thanks for trusting me," Jack chuckled. He stood up from the pilot's chair just enough to spin it around and sit back down so he was straddling it. He looked out at the flat grey view outside the ship for a few minutes. "There's something I've been meaning to ask, though."

"Shoot."

Jack spun the chair to look at Hiccup, who sat in the navigator's

seat.

"\_The Stormfly II\_. I would ask about the name itself. But the fact it's the second one make me really curious. I mean, you're twenty-one, and you said you've lived on Berk all your life. How many ships have you had?"

A shadow passed over Hiccup's face, his green eyes staring out the viewport, though it didn't look as though he was seeing the fog.

"Sorry," Jack sighed. "If it's personal you don't have toâ€"

"It's a girl."

Jack blinked, processing the information. "A girl named Stormfly? I knew Vikings had a thing for different names, but that one seems a little out there."

"They think a hideous name will scare away trolls, or something," Hiccup said, rolling his eyes. "As if our charming Viking demeanor wouldn't do that."

Jack smirked. Hiccup's dark sarcasm was growing on him. But his friend's glimmer of humor faded quickly, and he sighed.

" This is my second ship. My dad's best friend, Gobber, was the Hooligan tribe's chief engineer, and my dad apprenticed me to him when I was young, so he helped me repair my first ship when I was twelve. It was a Berk Common, and I called it \_The Hopeful Puffin\_."

"Theâ€" Jack bit his tongue before he could finish that question, and gestured for Hiccup to continue his story.

"Thanks," Hiccup said, rolling his eyes. "Anyway. The fleet on Berk is called The Dragons, and everyone goes through the Dragon Training program when they're fourteen. The girl's name was Astrid, and we were in training together. I can pilot a ship from one place to another. But when it comes to complex maneuversâ€| just let me fix the engines after you strain them fighting G-forces. But Astrid. Astrid was brilliant. Beautiful strong, smart, one of the best pilots I've ever seen."

"Better than me?" Jack asked, quirking an eyebrow before he realized that that questions might seem insensitive.

Thankfully, Hiccup chuckled. "No. But close. Her style was more direct. The way you fly is like dancing. The way Astrid flew was light fighting.

"She was also completely insane, and irritating, andâ€|" Hiccup sighed, shoulder deflating. "She was amazing. I fell in love with her when I was like five, and I didn't have a chance. She was top of the class, and I was the geeky kid who tinkered with dead engines, trying to do anything that might get his dad to notice him. And I worshiped the ground she walked on. I was ecstatic if she threw anything in my direction for me to fix. Every guy in class wanted her â€" my cousin Snotlout wouldn't stop hitting on her.

"Alvin started his takeover of Berk when I was fifteen, and by the time I was eighteen he had most of the tribes under his control. It was really just the Hooligans â€" my tribe â€" and the Bog Burglars â€" our closest ally â€" left. No one dared stand up to him â€" except me. And I wasn't even trying. It seemed like I just ended up in a place at a time, and it was always in opposition to him. Whether it was right or wrong, I still haven't figured out." Hiccup rubbed the tattoo on his right temple â€" the 'S' shaped dragon he was usually so careful to keep covered with his bangs. Jack knew what it represented, but hadn't yet dared to ask about. "Sometimes I think I have it figured out. Then something happens and I start wondering all over again.

"I was eighteen when Alvin made his move on us. We had no hope of beating him â€" a blind man could have seen that. We were outnumbered almost ten to one. But my father is a Viking through and through, and he might as well be blind sometimes.

"He beat us back and landed his flagship to gloat. I'd had enough run ins with him I didn't bother to wait around after the battle finished â€" he'd already made it clear he wouldn't be happy until I was dead. Maybe I was a coward, but I ran. My friends, Fishlegs and Camicazi helped me get to the hanger bay so I could use my fighter to get out of the city."

"And your fighter was \_The Stormfly I\_?"

Hiccup shook his head. "No. \_The Hopeful Puffin II\_."

Jack grimaced at the name, but decided to just be glad Hiccup hadn't chosen to call this ship \_The Hopeful Puffin III\_.

"Astrid was already in the hanger bay. And she had always been the perfect soldier, so I thought for sure she would turn me over to Alvin. For a minute we just stood there, ready to run if she called one of his men, and she just glared down at us from the wing of her fighter â€" \_The Stormfly\_. Then she told me I should head west â€" stay to the ocean, between the islands, and head for the country beyond the Archipelago.

"Within a week I was the most wanted fugitive on Berk, by order of His Most Excellent Majesty, Self-Proclaimed Monarch Alvin the Treacherous I, unifier of the tribes of Berk. I can't even say that without wanting to throw up. I'm pretty sure his mother â€" Excellinor â€" is the one who's really ruling, and that witch completely insane."

"Understandable," Jack muttered.

"He's a tyrant, and he knows it. He's proud of it." Hiccup's hands clenched until his knuckles were white. "Berk may not have the cleanest history. But what he's doing puts a lot of it to shame. He enslaves anyone who questions or displeases him â€" his mother is even worse. Execution is a better option.

"He sent the Dragons out looking for me. Astrid found me in the woods beyond the edge of the Archipelago a week later, and told me Alvin had enslaved Fishlegs and Camicazi in hopes I would come out of hiding to rescue them. It was an obvious trap. But they had stood by me for four years. Fishlegs was an orphan, and he was even weirder

than I was â€" I was the closest thing he had to a family. After all we'd been through, I couldn't abandon either of them."

The part of Jack's mind that had absorbed the Imperial teachings almost shook his head in disbelief. But the larger part of him admired his friend's loyalty.

"So I went back. Fishlegs was missing by the time I got to the Slavelands. I managed to find him, but as soon as I did Alvin captured me. I was dragged in front of Alvin and his mother and the thrones they had set up in the eating hall. Excellinor was throwing some fit again, like she always is. The moment Alvin saw me he almost started dancing."

"What did you do?" Jack asked, leaning forward when Hiccup paused.

"Alvin and Excellinor are both insane â€" reasoning with them is impossible. So I tried to reason with the other Vikings. Which still isn't easy, since they're not the most logical group of people. But I knew I had a chance. I tried to appeal to their sense of honor. And it worked â€" especially with people like my father, who were uncomfortable with what Alvin was doing. And people my age, who I had met, or who just didn't like Alvin.

"But Excellinor." Hiccup's hands clenched again, until his knuckles were white. "It seems like she's always a step ahead of me. Ever since she tricked me into letting her out of that cell when I was sixteen. She started screeching that if they listened to me they would be turning their back on the Viking Code I claimed to be upholding. When someone asked when she mean, she pulled back my bangs to show everyone my Slavemark. I'd managed to hide it for three bloody years, from everyone. At least, I thought I had. But excellinor knew somehow."

He pulled back his hair to show Jack the tattoo. "I know you recognized it. You're the first person I've met who knew what it was and didn't think less of me for it. Thanks."

Jack just shrugged. "I've got a past, Hiccup."

"I figured," Hiccup said. "Still. On Berk you lose all your rights, your freedomâ€" it doesn't matter how you got it. No one cares that I had to get it to make a deal with the slaves when I was kidnapped, and it was the only way Fishlegs and I survived. You're a slave once you're marked, and there's no going back. I wasn't a citizen, let alone heir to a chief.

"I made one last appeal, reminding them Alvin had already enslaved some of their greatest heroes. Alvin knocked me aside, trying to shut me up. But Astrid left the other Dragons and helped me up. Once I had her on my side â€" the star Dragon â€" the others were willing to take a chance and join a rebellion against Alvin. We fought our way out, and that night I took one more shot and told her how I felt."

Hiccup grinned â€" a genuine grin â€" and Jack could guess what Astrid's response had been. And it had been a bright light in a very dark period of Hiccup's life. Jack found himself reflecting the expression as he rested his chin on the back of his chair.

"We were in the middle of a war that I was single handedly credited with starting. It felt like we were going through hell at times. But Astrid and I had three months together. This is me we're talking about, though. I don't get to be that happy." He looked down at the studded leather strap that was wrapped several times around his left wrist. "Maybe it was stupid â€" I mean, I was nineteen. The last time I saw her I asked her to marry me. Maybe I knew she wasn't coming back." He shook his head.

"We both knew Alvin would go after her to get to me." Hiccup laughed, but Jack could see the pain in his eyes. "But she didn't care about the danger. 'Occupational hazard', as my dad says. And I couldn't have stopped her if I wanted to. And I knew her well enough that I didn't really want to. I would have done anything for her, to protect her. But she wouldn't have been my Astrid if she didn't â€" Does that make any sense?"

Jack felt his lips quirk in a grin, trying to reassure his friends. "It does."

"Thanks."

Jack spun his chair to look out at the fog beyond the viewport, thinking about Hiccup's story. He had known a few of the details from things Hiccup had mentioned in the past six months, but this filled in most of the gaps.

He was about to turn back to Hiccup for the rest of the story (there had to be more, since he still didn't have the answer to his original question). But just before he did, the fog outside the window started to visibly thin. First the lights around the landing pas showed up, then the silhouette of the castle, until they could see the black lake shimmering under the night sky.

Quirking an eyebrow, he looked back at Hiccup. "Did that look natural to you?"

"Not really," Hiccup said. "Let's get out of here."

#

Once they were safely in hyperspace, they both left the cockpit, heading fo the their rooms for a few hours of sleep.

"So, how did you get over losing Astrid?" Jack asked, glancing over at his friend as he slid his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "I can't imagine losing someone I loved that much."

"I had to," Hiccup said quietly. "I had started a rebellion â€" I had to see it through. So I thought at the time. But after two years, we were losing. The only way any of us were going to survive was to surrender. My dad gave me this ship and told me to get off world. So I ended up running away â€" again. Part of me thinks I should go back, find a way to set things right. But I don't know how."

Hiccup sighed, running a hand over his face.

"I knew Astrid wouldn't want me naming my ship after her, but she wouldn't mind \_The Stormfly II\_. It's still not easy, but I realized

I just have to keep going."

That's life, isn't it?" Jack asked, looking down at his bare feet as they continued down the hallway.

"Far as I can tell," Hiccup sighed.

"I feel too young for this," Jack muttered, running a hand through his hair.

"I said the same thing when I was nineteen," Hiccup said. "Gobber told me the truth is that you never feel old enough. But eventually you have to start taking responsibility."

"Wish someone had told me that."

Maybe if he had told someone why he was running away from his responsibilities, they would have told him. Maybe North or Toothiana had tried to tell him, but he'd been too young, too dumb, to realize what they were trying to say.

They rounded the corner to the hallway where their rooms were, and Jack was pulled out of his thoughts by the sound of running footsteps. His head jerked up, and he glanced over at Hiccup to make sure it hadn't been his imagination. Their eyes met just long enough for him to know Hiccup had heard it as well, and they both took off running.

They reached the end of the hall and turned left, just in time to see a flash of red at the end of the next hall, turning left again.

"Stowaway," Hiccup muttered. He was several inches taller, so his longer legs let him pull ahead, and he rounded the corner three seconds ahead of Jack.

This time they caught sight of a female figure dressed in dark blue, with a mass of flaming red hair. She turned right.

Jack frowned, realizing she probably had no idea as to the ship's layout, because she was running herself straight to a hall that only ended in a turbolift. From there it would only be up to the fourth level where there were a few unused rooms and a viewing platform, or down to the belly of the ship, where the engine room took up most of the two lower levels. Other than that there was just the hold, which was currently empty since they had been on DunBroch to make a delivery.

"Keep going, I'll cut her off!" Jack called.

He swerved left, while Hiccup followed the stowaway to the right. Jack headed for another turbo lift, which was closer than the one she would end up having to take if Hiccup didn't catch up to her first. He decided to follow his haunch that she would choose to go down.

He went down one level and stepped out onto the bright green catwalk that was set up for the ease of maintaining the engine, heading toward the next turbolift. He rounded the power converter just as the lift doors slid open and the girl came out.

Her eyes widened when she saw him. And he braced himself just in time to dodge the fist she threw at his face. Jack swerved out of the way. He knocked her next blow aside.

At first he tried to hold back, sticking to defense " until her fist actually collided with his right cheekbone with bruising force. Jack stumbled backwards, recovering from the pain and the force of the blow. From there instinct took over. He didn't care who or what he was fighting " only that he was fighting.

She threw another punch, and this time Jack caught her wrist, slamming his own fist into her solar plexus.

His intent was to get her off her feet, out of the fight.

She stumbled back, gasping for breath as the force caused her diaphragm to spasm.

But she came back quickly. Obviously she'd had training. And she was aiming for the same thing he was " to end this fight quickly.

Jack side stepped the knee aimed at his groin just in time, grimacing. That was playing dirty.

He grabbed her arm, twisting it behind her back, her wrist up between her shoulder blades. She let out a cry of pain, which caused Jack's stomach to wring with guilt. Toothiana had driven it into him that he was supposed to respect women, and this didn't line up. But he didn't let go, in case she turned around and attacked him again.

The turbolift doors slid open again, Hiccup stepping out just as the young woman grunted in pain again.

"Let her go," Hiccup said, shaking his head.

Jack nodded, letting go of her wrist and taking a step back.

"I wasn't gonna hurt ya," she snapped, glowering at him with light teal eyes. Her accent, and lion's mane of curly red hair, confirmed his guess she was from Caledonia. Not a hard guess, but still.

"Right." Jack gingerly touched his throbbing right cheek. That's why you attacked me."

"Ya startled me," she said. "What's wrong with yer hair, anyway?"

"It's white " there's nothing \_wrong\_ with it," Jack said. "And I could as you the same thing."

"Did ya see a ghost when ye were a babe?" she asked, smiling dangerously. "Or do ya dye it?"

"No, I'm the spirit of with," he said, balancing sarcasm and a threat in his tone.

"All right, enough," Hiccup said, holding up his hands to get their attention. "It's always the simple jobs."

Jack tried to smirk, but his bruised cheek made that difficult.

Hiccup looked back at the young woman, who was just pushing herself up off the catwalk. "Princess Merida, am I right?"

"Aye," she muttered.

"Wait." Jack frowned. "I thought the whole reason we were on DunBroch was to deliver supplies for her wedding."

"No, it's the competition to decide who they'll marry me off to," she said. "I ain't some prize to be won."

"Well, technically every woman is a prize," Hiccup said. Both Jack and Merida stared at him. "Though you're the only one who has the right to decide who's worth, or whatever. That sounded a lot better in my head."

"Made sense to me," Jack said, leaning against the wall.

"I don't want to be married," Merida snapped. "Not now, and not ever. Especially if it's arranged!"

"So you stowed away on a random ship instead of talking to your parents." Jack rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that'll solve everything."

"Ma mum won't listen to me! She doesn't care what I want. She's too busy tryin' to turn me into some mini version of her, tellin' me what I can an' can't do!"

"At least you have a family," Jack said, shrugging in an attempt to keep his words casual. "Not all of us do."

"Jack," Hiccup cautioned quietly.

He nodded, understanding that he wasn't helping.

#

Hiccup managed to peacefully move all three of them to the ship's dining area. Merida took an apple from the counter as she sat across from Hiccup at the table, taking a large, loud bite. Jack leaned against a wall, watching both of them. He had a suspicion what was going to happen, and he wasn't sure he liked it.

"So you stowed away on a random ship?" Hiccup asked.

"How did you get on, anyway?" Jack asked.

Merida swallowed her bite, wiping juice from the corner of her mouth. "Yer boarding ramp was down."

"No it wasn't," Jack said, frowning.

She raised a red eyebrow.

Jack looked at Hiccup. "You were the last one onboard, right?"



"I know I shut the ramp," Hiccup said. "You were with me â€" you helped me carry the supplies to the galley."

"You shut it," Jack confirmed, and they both looked back at Merida, who had returned her attention to her apple.

"It was down when I walked by," Merida said. "And I didn't choose ya at random. Noticed the two of ya while ya were refuelin', and figured ya'd be ma best chance."

"You still got on a ship with two men you didn't know," Jack frowned.

"I can take care o' maself."

Jack bit his tongue, deciding not to burst that bubble. He had taken care of her easily â€" if Hiccup had been there it would have been overkill. She had skill, he would give her that. But he was getting the impression she overestimated her own abilities.

Hiccup glanced over at him, clearly expecting a comeback, but Jack just shrugged.

"And where exactly do you plan on going?" Hiccup asked, turning back to Merida. He was the practical one, after all.

Merida hesitated. It was only a fraction â€" but enough Jack could tell she hadn't given any thought to a destination.

"A-anywhere," she said.

"And once you get there?"

This time it wasn't a hesitation â€" it was a full on pause. Finally she looked down at the apple in her hand.

"I-I'll figure it out."

Jack and Hiccup exchanged glances. "Do you have any funds?"

She frowned.

"Did you bring anything?"

She reached into the collar of her dress, pulling out a gold necklace. Jack recognized the seal of the DunBrock kingdom â€" it had been on banners all over the city. "I have this."

Hiccup watched the arc of the necklace as it swayed from her hand, then looked back at the red head. "Give us a sec."

He stood up from the table, gesturing for Jack to follow him into the hallway, closing the door behind them.

"Any thoughts?" he asked.

Jack frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know." Hiccup shrugged. "What are we going to do with her?"

"What are our options?" Jack asked, though the question was rhetorical. He leaned back against the wall across from the door. "We can take her back to her parents â€" but considering we're both running from something that feels a little hypocritical."

"And there's no guarantee she won't try again," Hiccup said. "And you already pointed out: she got on a ship with two men she didn't know. At least we both know neither of us is going to touch her."

Jack nodded.

"And, stowaway or not, I can't see handing her over to the Empire."

"I wouldn't let you," Jack sighed. "And my conscience won't let me just leave her on a strange planet when she had no idea what she's getting herself into."

"Which doesn't leave us with much," Hiccup said. "Unless we have her stay with us."

Jack scowled. That didn't sound like the most enjoyable option, but it was the only one that would sit well with his conscience. "You're the captain."

"And you're currently my only friend, so advice is welcome," Hiccup reminded. "And I'd like to keep you as a pilot."

#

Merida was finishing her apple when they returned the dining room, and she watched them warily. Jack went over to the fridge unit, pulling out a container of leftovers as Hiccup resumed his seat at the table.

"Here's my offer," Hiccup said. "You can't stay on the ship as a stowaway. So you'll work to pay for your passage. Our next stop is on Atlantis. We'll be there for a few hours at least, so you can see if it's a place you want to stay, or if you want to get back on with us. Or you can start looking through the navcomputer and figure out where you would rather go."

She looked between them for a moment, down at her apple core, then back to Hiccup. "Do I have a choice?"

"Sure," Hiccup shrugged. "Whether we lock you in one of the rooms, or if we set it up for you and give you control of the lock."

## 23. Chapter 23

**\*\*I'm currently hosting an \*\_\*\*Among The Stars \*\_\*\*contest on my tumblr page. I've designed five outfits for Jack in ATS, and posted the line arts for you guys to color. For each outfit I'll pick one winner, and that will become the official color scheme for the outfit. There are other prizes too, so go check it out â€" after you finish this chapter. Go to tumblr and search for the ATSTContest tag, the rules and such are there, along with links to the line art.\*\***

\*\*So, as may become pretty obvious in this chapter â€" I know nothing about computer programming. I know corrupted files are bad, but I have no idea what causes them, and no idea how to fix them. But we're going to just pretend this plot twist works â€" because my \*\*\_\*\*Star Wars\*\*\_\*\* mentor (who knew a whole lot more than I did even at my best) didn't get back to me when I asked for help.\*\*

\*\*So, \*\*\_\*\*The Stormfly II\*\*\_\*\* is supposed to be smaller than \*\*\_\*\*The Night Fury\*\*\_\*\*, since the latter is supposed to be an upgradeâ€| but while in chapter 3 I said that \*\*\_\*\*The Night Fury\*\*\_\*\*'s cockpit was crowded with all four of them in it, my mental image for \*\*\_\*\*The Stormfly\*\*\_\*\*'s cockpit is huge; complete with different stations for the pilot, co-pilot, and navigator. But maybe I shouldn't be too surprised. When I started this story, I was thinking \*\*\_\*\*Star Wars\*\*\_\*\*, so I imagined the cockpit on the \*\*\_\*\*Millennium Falcon\*\*\_\*\*. But lately I've watched so much \*\*\_\*\*Star Trek\*\*\_\*\* (multiple versions), that I'm eschewing more towards the bridge of the \*\*\_\*\*Enterprise\*\*\_\*\*. XP\*\*

\*\*Anyway, this chapter is dedicated to Disneydame88, for cheering me up so I was able to get this chapter done. \*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 23\_

Jack's throat ached.

Merida's arrival on \_The Stormfly\_ had brought a drastic increase in the volume onboard the ship. The girl had a set of lungs that Jack wouldn't almost find admirable, if she didn't put them to full use whenever she was mad â€" and she seemed to be mad more often than she wasn't. Hence the ache in Jack's throat, from trying to get a word in edgewise

And Hiccup, who seemed to be physically incapable of raising his voice to anywhere near half of what Jack and Merida reached, was stuck with pulling them apart, and occasionally throwing blows of his own to at least get their attention. (Blows normally aimed at Jack, since Hiccup was unwilling to hit a girl â€" which didn't make the read head any more endearing. Hiccup may not look like much, but there was some force behind his punches.)

He tried to be sympathetic, remembering how moody he had been when he had first started at the academy. He had spent the first few weeks avoiding everyone, and the fuse to his temper had been shorter than usual. But she was pushing his sympathy to the limits, and he doubted her attitude had so much to do with regret at leaving as home as it did that she was just spoiled. Not that he would say that out loud. He was doing his best to just stay out of her way. Hiccup had more patience, and Merida was almost civilized when talking to him.

But the day, so far, had been blissfully quiet. He didn't know where Merida was, and as long as she stayed out of his way he really didn't care.

In the back of his mind, a voice whispered that maybe this was just the calm before the storm, and he should be suspiciousâ€| but he was too glad to have a little peace for the first time in almost a week.

So he ignored that nagging in his mind as he walked down the now familiar halls of the ship, the fingers of his right hand skimming the smooth wall as he headed for the cockpit.

There were four places on the ship that Hiccup had marked out as off limits to Merida: Hiccup's room, Jack's room, the engine room, and the cockpit, since he had no reason to go to any of those places. The gun turret hadn't even been mentioned, and Jack got the feeling Hiccup didn't want her to know it existed. A wise choice, in his mind.

Considering Jack spent most of his time in two places that were off limits to her, he didn't understand how she ended up in his way so often. It seemed like she was everywhere at once, in his way the moment he stepped out of his room or the cockpit. If he went to the galley for something to eat, she was there. If he went to the ship's library to use one of the computers, she was there. And in every other hallway in between.

Jack told himself to keep breathing, and chanted over and over in his mind that she would be off the ship as soon as they reached Atlantis. He chose to ignore the little voice in his mind that told him she wasn't going anywhere any time soon. She had made it clear she wanted off this ship as much as he wanted to kick her off. So why in the universe would she end up staying?

He told himself he was just being paranoid.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts as he reached the cockpit. They would be shuddering out of hyperspace in a matter of minutes, and he preferred to set the next jump in himself, rather than just leaving it to the navcomputer, on the off chance something went wrong. (It also gave him something to do.)

The door of the cockpit slid open smoothly, as they usually did. But what wasn't usual was that the lights, which were connected to the door, didn't blink on as he stepped inside, because they were already on. And the slick swish of the door faded quickly enough for him to hear a catch of breath that wasn't Hiccup.

Biting his tongue, and squeezing his fist to resist breaking something, he turned toward the sound and saw Merida sitting at the navigator's station, a star chart from the holo-projector hovering a few inches above the console. Her fingers were frozen over the controls as she looked at him.

Her aqua eyes couldn't seem to decide if they wanted to challenge him, but they seemed reluctant to look away in shame either, so her gaze darted between his eyes and the floor several times as he stood just inside the doorway of the cockpit.

Jack considered physically lifting her out of her chair and throwing her out of the cockpit, and the thought was satisfying. And Hiccup had made it clear she wasn't allowed on the cockpit. Both because she had no reason to be there and probably so Jack could do his own job in peace. So, if he did throw her through the door, his friend wouldn't give him a hard time for it — just for the way he did it. But she would probably fight back, and he wasn't in the mood for that. He wasn't in the mood for a fight period.

So he was the first to move, shaking his head in disbelief at her audacity as he headed down the steps to flop down into the pilot's seat and turn his attention instead to the controls.

He checked the readouts, which were all exactly as they should be. The screen that connected him to the navigation computers told him he had timed his arrival perfectly. They would drop out of hyperspace in a few minutes " just enough time for him to set the next jump into the computer so they wouldn't be sitting in space any longer than it would take him to adjust the ship's angle. And they were only two jumps from Atlantis. Two jumps, and Merida would be off the ship.

He could afford to be charitable this one time, provided she do anything to provoke him.

After a moment he finally heard her chair as she turned back to face the navigation console, and the sound of the controls as she went back to work at whatever she was doing.

"Just don't break anything," he said, unable to bite it back.

He thought he heard her open her mouth, and start to say something. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw her close her mouth and her eyes, and take a deep breath.

"I won't," was all she said, opening her eyes to turn all her focus back to the star chart in front of her.

Satisfied, Jack turned his attention back to his own console.

The computer was currently set up so the nav controls ran through the pilot's computer. Since they didn't have a navigator, there was no point in Jack having to go back and forth between the two seats in order to send the ship through space. So whatever Merida was doing, she couldn't affect the ship without inputting the control code (which only Jack and Hiccup had) or doing something truly stupid. (It would also be possible to hack into the system, but Jack doubted that kind of skill was in the girl's repertoire. And the computer was set to alert him and Hiccup if anyone tried to get into the system through a back door, so he wasn't too worried about that.)

There were some things that required the full nav computers. But a simple hyperspace jump, when he had already input the final destination, wasn't one of them.

Jack was just inputting the last string of coordinates into the computer for the next jump when the ship shuddered, and he looked up through the viewport just in time to watch as the molten colors faded away, and the star lines snapped into steady pinpricks of light in the black walls of the galaxy.

When the ship and its surroundings were still, and he had made sure there was nothing in the way, he turned back to the computer and continued inputting the coordinates. Once he had entered them, he took the yoke of the ship and adjusted the angle of the nose. The computer chimed when he was lined up to make the jump he had inputted.

With one final check (North always demanded one final check, even when he was sure everything was in place), Jack engaged the

hyperdrive. For a moment it felt as though time had stopped. No matter how many jumps Jack made, he never got used to that agonizing moment. Then it ended as fast as it had begun " the ship jumped forward, pressing him back into his seat as the stars brightened and lengthened and they were thrown back into the shifting light tunnel of hyperspace.

He took a deep, shaky breath, refilling his lungs. The jump always seemed to pull all the oxygen from him.

A muffled moan made him look back.

Merida leaned over the console, her hair inside the projected the map, so one of her wild red curls was in the midst of the Sophanta Star Cluster. When she lifted her head enough for him to get a glimpse of her face, he saw it was so pale it was almost green.

Jack chuckled sympathetically. "You get used to it."

"If ye say so," she said, frowning as she sat up slowly, groaning again as she rested a hand on her stomach. "I'll be glad t' get off this ship. I'm not sure how much more o' this I can take."

"We only have one more jump," Jack said, standing up from the pilot's chair and stretching his arms over his head. He yawned before adding: "And that'll be in the middle of the sleep cycle, so you probably won't even notice it."

"Hope so," she muttered, leaning back. It didn't look as though she would be getting up out of her seat very soon.

A little voice in the back of Jack's mind began to whisper that maybe Merida wasn't so bad, when she wasn't yelling, or throwing punches at his face. And it was possible their initial meeting had made him biased.

But that thought was cut off when a red flash caught his eye, and he jerked his head over to the computer screen in front of Merida " the source of the light. His stomach plummeted in dread as he ran over to the navigator's station, pushing her aside and closing down the star chart so he could get a better view of the screen.

"Move!" he snapped, elbowing her out of the way when he got a glimpse of what was happening on the screen " his dread hadn't been an overreaction. If anything, this was worse. He slammed his fist against the comm next to the computer " thankfully Vikings were known for their beefy hands, so the ship was designed to take more of a beating on a daily basis than Jack could give it in his worst moments. "Hiccup, get up here. Now!"

Computers weren't his specialty, but he sat down in the seat he had just pushed Merida from, fingers racing over the keys as he tried to call back everything he had learned from North and the Academy.

He recognized what he was seeing " the rapidly changing lines of code could only mean that something in the computer had been corrupted. Merida had probably hit just the wrong keys in her moment of space sickness after the jump.

It became obvious very quickly that he was out of his depth, and

there was nothing he could do to stop it. He couldn't even remember how to go back and find out exactly what part of the intricate programming had been corrupted.

Standing up, he rounded on Merida.

"This is why you were supposed to stay out of my cockpit!" he snapped, glaring at her.

Her surprise faded in all the time it took her to blink, wide eyes narrowing as she returned his glare measure for measure.

"It's not your cockpit!" she said. "It's Hiccup's ship!"

"Hiccup's ship, my cockpit," Jack said. "It's perks of being a pilot. Whereas you, on the other hand, are an over glorified stowaway, who may now be responsible for killing us all."

He sidestepped the punch she aimed at his face, rolling his eyes. Her temper made her rash, and she was too easy to read. This was saying something, since Bunnymund had never been pleased with Jack's skills when it came to reading an opponent (his own impatience made it next to impossible for him to focus on the nuances).

Another swing, another step out of the way.

"Say that again â€" I dare ya!"

"Why?" he asked. "I'm pretty sure you heard me. Now get out, before you break something else!"

She threw another punch, and this time Jack raised his right arm, so her fist collided â€" hard â€" with the unforgiving metal of her gauntlet. He saw the flash of pain in her eyes as she reeled back. But there wasn't even a flash of sympathy as he spun, shifting his weight to his left heel as he swung his right leg up and around, in the general direction of her side.

Merida managed to duck under his foot, somersaulting out of the way.

But as soon as she was back on her feet, Jack lunged forward. He had one goal in mind, and that was to get her out of the cockpit, and out of the way, so Hiccup could work on the computer. He could only hope that the problem either wasn't too big, or that Hiccup would be able to fix it â€" preferably before it started affecting the ship.

He grabbed her upper arm, to drag her towards the door of the cockpit.

But as he'd predicted earlier, she fought back. Merida wrestled against his grip, grabbing the collar of his shirt, forearms braced against his chest to keep space between them, using it as leverage to fight his pull toward the door.

Jack got a hold of her other arm as well, and spun toward the door. He was still stronger, and aimed to get her out the door. But she used the momentum of their movement against him and slammed him against the doorway with bruising force.

Jack grimaced as pain shot through the back of his left shoulder.

He grit his teeth, digging his feet in and preparing to push back, aiming for the opposite side of the doorway.

"Enough!" Hiccup gripped Jack's wrist, twisting it until he let go of Merida's arm, then pulling it back over his shoulder, just far enough that it hurt. "Let go."

He pulled Jack's arm a little more when he hesitated, and Jack got the point " he let go of Merida's other arm.

"Don't get blood all over my ship " seriously," Hiccup said, going over to take a seat at the computer and looking over the screen. After a moment his fingers began racing over the keys, with a cool surety that helped Jack relax in a strange way.

Jack went back to the pilot's seat, watching his friend work at the computer. There was no sign of panic on Hiccup's face, so it felt safe to take a deep breath and let it out slowly. If they were about to die, he was fairly sure Hiccup would say something, or it would at least be visible in his expression.

Finally, after what felt like hours (but what the chrono told him was only a few minutes), Hiccup's fingers stilled and his green eyes looked up, his gaze moving between Jack and Merida.

"Some of the auto-pilot programming was corrupted," he said, letting out a deep breath and leaning back in his seat.

"What parts?" Jack asked.

"The landing program is pretty much shot," Hiccup shrugged, and looked up at Jack. "Hopefully you're as good as you say. Think you'll be able to land us on Atlantis?"

"Shouldn't be too much of a problem. As long as you keep her out of the cockpit while I'm trying to concentrate." He jerked his head toward Merida, who had taken a seat at the communication station.

For the first time in the week she had been on the ship, her head was bowed, and she looked penitent, not as though she owned the ship. The over confidence that had grated Jack's nerves was gone.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's fine," Hiccup said with a sigh. "It could have been worse."

He looked at Jack. "I don't have the skill to rewrite the programs " and the only way to rewrite it without a programmer is"

"A reset disk," Jack muttered, rubbing a hand over his forehead as he exhaled and leaned back in the pilot's chair.

"I don't understand," Merida said, her voice quiet, softer than Jack had ever heard. "If ye just need t' run a reset disk, it doesn't seem like that's so bad."



"No," Hiccup sighed. "It could be worse. But I don't have the reset disks anymore, so we have to hope they have one on Atlantis" and they're not cheap."

"And the reset disks will rewrite the whole system" we can't specify it to just the corrupted programs," Jack said. "This isn't a datapad, or something. The programs are so expansive and complex, it will take almost two days to take everything back to original settings, then another day or so for Hiccup and I to reconfigure it back to the way it was, so I can pilot the ship myself."

"Looks like we'll be on Atlantis for a few days," Jack said, standing up.

#

The bruise, and the sore muscles, made it harder to scrub down as Jack stood under the hot water that rained down on him from the shower head a few days later. He grimaced as he tried again to raise his left hand to the right side of his chest and shoulder with the soapy rag. He ignored the pain as he quickly rubbed the skin before he had to return it to his side.

The past two days had been almost silent, all three of them staying in their rooms. The few times he had seen Merida she had refused to meet his eyes, and tended to leave the room quickly. Hiccup just looked tired.

The computer problem wasn't that big of an issue. It didn't touch the life support systems, and Jack was capable of making a landing without the assistance of the computer. It was more the principle of the issue, and the fact it could so easily have been something so much worse. If it had been the life support systems, or the weapons systems, they would all be dead now.

Jack sighed.

But still. How she had managed to corrupt the program was beyond what either he or Hiccup could figure out. The odds of her accidentally hitting the right keys, in the right sequence, where almost a million to one.

"This is my life we're talking about, though," Hiccup had muttered as they had sat in the cockpit, running a full diagnostic on the computer.

They would likely be in orbit around Atlantis by the time he got out of the shower. Thankfully, Hiccup would probably understand, even if they sat in orbit for a few minutes.

Wringing out the cloth, he draped it over the bar on the wall of the shower unit and stepped back directly under the stream of warm water, so the soap was washed off by the water pressure. He did his best to rinse the conditioner from his hair exclusively with his right hand.

Once that was done he was clean, but he wasn't ready to get out. So he turned and rested his forehead against the back wall of the shower, and let the water run down his back, heating his skin.

Rivulets of water slid out of his hair, down his forehead.

His eyes drifted to one side, to the small shelf in the corner, where his bottle of body wash sat. He took in the logo on the front, and the name of the scent "neither of which meant anything to him. Idly he wondered why there were five hundred different brands of body wash. Even in a galaxy this big, were that many options really necessary?

Familiarity with the ship allowed him to hear the subtle shift in the engine just in time to brace himself as the ship shuddered and dropped out of light speed.

They had reached Atlantis.

There was no reason for him to stay in the shower. The heat of the water had penetrated his skin, and would probably radiate from him at least for a few minutes after he got out. Which he would have to do eventually, so he might as well get it over with.

Once they landed, he could get Merida off The Stormfly, and go looking for a set of reset disks that would be compatible with a Nadder 10-21. His moment of charity toward Merida had ended solidly, and he highly doubted it would be returning any time soon.

There wasn't even a guarantee that there would be a set of disks on Atlantis. But he hoped. He really didn't want to go running across the galaxy searching for them.

Jack shook his head, glowering at a random point on the wall. But after a moment he just sighed and shut off the stream of water. He stood there for a few moments, letting the excess water slide off his skin, to spiral down the drain, to where it would be recycled back into the ship's system. It would be filtered and boiled down before it came back through the facets. Though they would probably dump and refill the tank with fresh water while they were on Atlantis. They might as well "they were going to be there long enough.

That was another thing. The disks would be expensive enough. But then they would have to pay the docking fee for at least three days.

He wiped his face of excess water and pushed open the door of the shower, reaching for the towel that hung from the ring on the wall. Pulling it down, it wrapped it around his shoulders so it caught the excess water off his back and arms.

Heat radiated from his skin, the opposite of what he would be radiating if he were on Warren. But he tried not to think about home as he wrapped the towel around his hips and folded in the corner so it would stay in place as he stepped out of the shower unit.

He made a mental not that if they ever upgraded to another ship, or if he ever went off on his own, to make sure the shower units were large enough to allow actual movement. He'd had this thought as long as he'd been on the ship, and it was renewed every time his elbow collided with the wall "as it did now.

He started toward his closet, to get at least a pair of pants before he headed for the cockpit. The air around him seemed frigid after the hot water/

"Well, well. I couldn't have planned this better if I tried."

The voice made him freeze, his fingertips inches from the handle of his closet door. And slowly, his hand returned to his side.

Even slower, he turned to face the figure that had materialized in his room, sitting on the edge of his bed. He was reluctant to call her a woman, despite her figure, which was clad in a dark purple dress. The body was human. But there was no mistaking her for human. Not with the way her long, dark hair was in constant motion â€" floating and billowing around her angled face in pure defiance of gravity (even if it was the artificial gravity of a ship).

"Jack." She smiled, purple painted lips pulled tight. Though the expression didn't reach her calculating, cat like eyes.

This really wasn't his week, was it?

"Eris."

**\*\*Chocolafied and Daydreamersmile on tumblr got me to watch DreamWorks's \*\*Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas\*\* for the first time a few weeks ago, and I think Eris is my favorite villain ever (I normally don't like villains, but her design was just so well done). So, when I had the idea to include her, I couldn't say no. I tried, but I couldn't. And she's still a DreamWorks character, so at least I'm not leaving the Disney/Pixar or DreamWorks universesâ€" right? (Plus, you guys seemed to like the references to Tiana and Naveen and \*\*The Croods\*\* in the last few chapters.)\*\***

**\*\*Writing Hiccup in this chapter also made me pull out HTTYD â€" watching it made me very happy. I don't think I've watched it in more than a year! It's kind of sad that he's my favorite of the four, yet he gets so little page time in this story. Part of it is that I'm afraid of not doing him and his clever sass justice. \*\***

**\*\*Don't forget to review (I love to hear your thoughts), and then take a look at/enter the ATS contest on tumblr. (Tag: ATSTest)\*\***

## 24. Chapter 24

**\*\*I was surprised how well Eris was received at the end of the last chapter. (Someone mentioned they wanted Eris to be Jack's scorned ex-girlfriendâ€" and while that doesn't fit the story, I would REALLY like to see a story like that.)\*\***

**\*\*I wish the landing scene was more tense and in depthâ€" but I hope you guys like it. \*\***

**\*\*Without further ado -\*\***

### Chapter 24

Jack's first encounter with the being that called herself Eris had been just under two years earlier, on the freighter that had taken him from Burgess to the Academy. She was drawn to any form of chaos in the galaxy, and she had come to enjoy the show when a zealot from

one of the many planets suffering under Gothel's tyranny had planned to hijack a freighter and crash it into the Imperial Palace on Pallash II.

Even as the time, as he'd prepared to enroll in the Academy, he wasn't opposed to statements against the Empire. But he wasn't a fan of suicide missions " especially when they would result in the deaths of innocents to the tune of thousands. The fact he would probably be among the dead had been reason 200,001 not to like the idea.

Eris had shown up at his side at some point on the trip, staring at him like he was some kind of novelty. His senses had told him she wasn't something to be messed with " even as her billowing black hair had told him she was more than she appeared. And she had no concept of personal space.

After asking a few questions he didn't understand, and didn't know why he answered them, Eris had looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"You're not supposed to be here." She had sidled around him like a cat, one hand on his neck while the other pressed a finger to her lips in though. "I'm not sure what you are " but you're not one of them. What are you?"

"Not one of who?" he asked, doing his best not to show how unnerved he was by her question and her presence.

Instinct told him she wasn't someone he wanted to risk insulting, so he had tried to take an inconspicuous step away from her to get some breathing space, if nothing else.

They had been standing in a shadowed hallway near the main area of the ship, where he had stepped in to try and get a grasp on all the thoughts that had been churning through his head since he left Warren, trying to figure out what he was going to do if he didn't make it into the Academy.

She didn't answer. Instead, her hand raised to his cheek, one finger curling. Jack's breath had caught in his throat when he felt the tip of a sharp nail against the skin on his cheek. But before he could flinch away, or her fingernail could scape across his skin, she had vanished from beside him.

Jack hated to admit he had gasp, spinning on his heel as his eyes darted around the hall in search of his tormentor.

When he had turned a full circle, he found her hovering a few feet away. Her eyes had been wide for several moments " the only time Jack had ever seen her unable to school her expression.

"You're one of Tsar Lunar's."

Jack had grimaced at her wording, but had forgotten that when her lips pulled in a smile, her surprise fading as she regained control.

"I came expecting on kind of show, but this is better," she said. "This is much better. I don't know how you got so far from home

little moonbeam â€" but I'd like to keep you alive. And I get the feeling you're of the same mind. If so, you might want to keep an eye out for anything, os, shall we sayâ€| out of the ordinary?"

With that she had vanished, and Jack was left wondering what had just happened.

She had reappeared every half an hour or so, hinting him toward the would-be hijacker. Needless to say, he had managed to take down the hijacker, but not before the pilot and copilot had been knocked out, so he'd ended up having to land the freighter on his own.

The good news was that he'd gained automatic admission into the Academy, and they hadn't required him to take the admission exam.

Since then, he had encountered her several times, during assignments at the Academy. He wasn't sure what he liked least about her: the fact her presence automatically meant he was about to find himself in a life or death situation, or he would be stuck with her riddling talk while he figured out \_who\_ was in a life or death situation and how to fix it. Her apparent fascination with him didn't make him any keener on seeing her.

It wasn't as creepy as Gothel's interest. Just as Gothel, Eris saw him as a toy â€" but as a completely different kind of toy.

Eris didn't believe in heroes â€" she was convinced it all came down to selfishness and ego when you stripped away the veneer. Jack couldn't deny that he could see her point. Once â€" for a moment â€" Jack had gotten what he believed to be frank honesty from her, and she had admitted that her fascination lay in testing him. She wanted to see what happened to already chaotic situations when he was a variable. She wanted to see what he did in life or death situations 0 how much he would really give to save someone he didn't know.

"I want to see how far I have to strip you down before you choose yourself," she had shrugged.

"Probably not very far," Jack had muttered at the time, looking down at the uniform jacket he had been about to put on.

"You underestimate yourself," Eris had said, chuckling. "Tsar Lunar only chooses the pure of heart â€" whatever that means. And I've already pushed you further than most."

That had been seven months ago.

#

"Just when I thought this couldn't get any better," Eris practically cooed. "It's been a while, Snowflake."

"Not long enough," Jack muttered. His left hand gripped the towel around his waist, making sure it stayed in place until Eris left and he could put on a pair of pants. "Why do you always show up when I'm getting dressed?"

"Because your blush is so cute," she said, smirking. Her dark hair billowed around her, never stopped. "And the fact your mind never

wanders down to the obvious, when I'm \_here\_â€" she lay back on his bed, and stretched languidly "â€"and you're, shall we sayâ€" less than decent?"

Jack rolled his eyes.

"Actually, I didn't plan it this time," sighing as though it pained her to admit it. "You just dropped out of hyperspace and I ran right over when I realized Tsar Lunar's lost little snowflake had come to visit me."

At 'ran right over' she appeared at his side, walking her fingers across his shoulder emphasis.

He swatted her hand away. He wasn't fond of her 'Snowflake' nickname, but it was better than 'Moonbeam', which she had used before finding out his name and territory.

She smirked and sat on the edge of his bed, a couple feet from where he still stood by the closet.

"I can't tell you how glad I was to hear you'd left the Academy. You should have seen the fit Gothel threw when she found out. The only thing that woman does well is throw fits. I do my best to \_never\_ miss a performance."

"I'm sure," Jack muttered, over Eris' laugh. He opened the closet and flicked through his clothes with his right hand, still keeping a firm grip on his towel.

"And you're right on time," Eris said, once she was done smiling fondly at the memory of Gothel's fits. "From what I can tell, it's just about to get good. Sometimes I really wish I knew \_what\_ was going to happenâ€|. But, I supposed, it's more interesting this way."

"Uh-huh." Jack pulled down a pair of cargo pants and tossed them onto his bed. "What exactly and I walking into?"

"Ah-ah." She wagged a finger at him. "You know that's against the rules."

She couldn't see ahead to what was going to happen, and she couldn't tell anyone something they didn't already know. Not specifics, at least. Gothel's fits, for example, were trivial enough she could tell him that. Though she loved her riddling talk so much he doubted she minded that one.

"But, I can tell you that it's shaping up like a fairytale," she said. "A mermaid, forbidden loveâ€" it's so mushy it's sickening. I would vomit, if I were capable. Too many sweet nothings â€" not enough screaming. But the tense political relations have been waiting to snap for the past three hundred years or so. One more stupid move from the right person, and it all should fall to pieces." She gave a wistful sigh. "And you. My favorite variable. Well, second favorite. No, third. Maybe fourth â€" oh, no, he's dead. Third favorite. And two new variables. Just when I thought it couldn't be any better."

Jack's hand froze on the hooded tshirt he'd just been about to pull

off the hanger. "Leave Hiccup and Merida out of it."

Eris rolled her eyes. "Please, Snowflake. You know I never get people involved. They show up on their own, and I occasionally push them in the right direction." She looked at her nails, as though checking her manicure. "But it's cute how you try to protect them, when you know just as well as I do that I can't do anything to anyone. I just drift through the galaxy, drawn to any planet where something interesting is happening."

Jack added the hooded tshirt and a vest to the cargo pants already on his bed. They narrowly missed Eris, who glared at them for a moment as though they had caused her personal offense. "Then why are you talking to me?"

"Because I'm bored," Eris sighed. She lay down, rolling onto her stomach, chin on one palm while the other hand picked at the zipper on one of the pockets of the vest. "They're taking \_forever\_. Really, chaos is inevitable. A blind man could see it. I don't know how they're able to put it off for so long."

Jack gave a noncomital grunt and tossed a pair of boxers onto the bed, where they landed on Eris hand (the one playing with the zipper of the cest), and Jack smirked as he watched her stare at them in disgust for a moment before shaking them off and sitting up.

"Now that was just rude."

"You can leave now," he said, jerking his head toward the viewport for emphasis.

Her eyes widened in mock surprise. "You're kicking me out \_already\_?"

"I let you stay longer than necessary," Jack said. "Now I have to get dressed."

"And I have to leave for that?"

He threw a pair of socks directly at her, and smirked into the closet door when they hit her square on the forehead.

She actually let out a cry of surprise before fading away.

"And stay out," Jack muttered, as he shut the closet door.

Taking a deep breath, he rubbed his forehead. He wanted to climb back into the shower and wash away the stress talking to Eris always gave him. It was a good thing his hair was already white, or he'd probably go grey at a very young age. He wasn't sure the warning her presence gave him was actually worth their conversations.

His commlink beeped, telling him the shower was off limits. "Jack, are you coming?"

"Yeah." He sighed. "One sec."

#

When North taught him how to fly, he had insisted Jack first learn

how to land on his own before he was allowed to land with assistance from the ship's software. And compared to the stress of landing \_The Sleigh\_ in the North Pole hanger, with North silent and imposing behind him the whole time, bringing \_The Stormfly\_ down was almost a walk in the park.

If the computer were online, the sensors would have told him exactly how much space he had on each side as he lowered the ship into the docking bay, and how far he was from the ground. He had to be aware of every wall, and at such a slow speed he wouldn't damage the landing gear if he miscalculated.

"If you need anythingâ€"

"Just keep an eye on the hull sensors," Jack said, cutting Hiccup off as he looked over his own feed from the sensors on the computer screens. At least that part of the computer wasn't down. He could probably still bring them down without it, but that would be just begging for something to go wrong.

Jack flexed his finger's on the ship's yoke and took a deep breath before leveling the ship out above the docking bay that air traffic control had assigned to them. Hiccup had told them about the situation, so their bay was away from the others that were occupied, or where they were already directing other ships. This would take time, and there was no point in stalling traffic if they didn't have to.

Jack looked at the feed from the sensors on the ship's belly, calculating as best he could from this distanceâ€| and slowly started to take the ship down.

"You're too close to the right," Hiccup said as they got closer, just as Jack saw the same thing from his own feed.

"I see it." Came to a stop, adjusting his position to the walls.

In the back of his mind he wondered vaguely where Merida was â€" but asking would take too much of his attention away from the landing.

As they got closer he pulled the ship back a few feet, putting some room between the wall and the ship's nose.

"How are we on the tail?" he asked, his attention fixed on the belly sensors that told him he was getting closer to the ground. He decreased their speed a little more, and the ship's engines protested, not meant to go so slow for more than a second or two.

"We're fine."

The ship was still jostled when the landing gear touched down, but that was inevitable. Jack temporarily forgot about Eris and her riddles and allowed himself a moment to bask in the glow of accomplishment before spinning the pilot's chair to look at Hiccup, who was back in the navigator's chair.

His friend's brows were raised, visibly impressed. "If we weren't already splitting the profits 50-50, I'd give you a raise."



Jack chuckled. "It's the thought that counts. So, what now?"

Hiccup frowned. "We'll be here a few days, so we might as well do a full refuel and supply. We'll dump and refill the water, and recharge the back up. Might as well change the air filters as well, and anything else the engine might need. First, let's get the resets disks. If you'll do that, I'll take Merida into town to look around."

"What are the odds she'll actually be able to establish a life here?" Jack asked.

Hiccup looked over to meet his gaze, silently asking what he meant.

"She's a princess," Jack said, keeping his voice low in case she was trying to listen in. "She's never worked a day in her life, and she's never been off Caledonia. This planet is a melting pot â€" and she's bound to insult someone, and probably the wrong person. What is she going to do â€" wait tables? No offense, but if she has any understanding of customer service skills, I'll be really surprised. And with no experience, or qualifications, there's not much else she can do."

"What are our other options?" Hiccup asked, the same question that came up every time they talked about what to do with the temperamental red head.

That was enough to make Jack fall silent, and wish he hadn't brought it up in the first place. He looked down at the floor for a moment.

"Even if I could handle her staying onboard â€" which I probably could â€" you obviously can't."

"So we just leave her on Atlantis?" Jack asked, challenge creeping into her voice.

Hiccup sighed in frustration, rubbing his face. His agitation was almost painfully obvious from the fact Jack could see the S-shaped slacemark on Hiccup's temple, but the brunet didn't make a move to check that it was covered.

"Why the sudden charity on your part?" Hiccup asked. "I got the impression you wanted to kick her through the airlock the other day."

Jack looked back at the slate grey floor. And hour ago, he would have happily waved Merida off and left her on Atlantis without a second thought.

But an hour ago he hadn't known that Atlantis was about to be stage to enough chaos as to get Eris' attention. And if it was enough to entertain Eris, it usually meant liver were going to be lost. Jack had only been able to prevent that once or twice.

Annoying as Merida could be, Jack wasn't capable of leaving her on any planet with Eris so close. There was chaos everywhere, and the worst could happen everywhere. But there was a difference between

knowing it could, and probably would happen, and knowing that it was brewing even as they sat there.

"I don't like that look," Hiccup said.

Jack smirked ruefully.

But what was he supposed to say? That the embodiment of discord had paid him a visit as he got out of the shower?

A little research after their first meeting when he had gotten to Pallas II had revealed that he wasn't the first person to run into her â€" far from it. There were a few societies across the galaxy that worshiped her as a goddess. But Warren was a monotheistic society, and Jack planned to maintain this in his own life, and he refused to give Eris the credit. He knew Eris' limitations too well to consider her a deity.

Even in his head he couldn't come up with a way to explain it to Hiccup (practical, logical Hiccup) in a way that didn't sound absolutely insane. And he didn't have any warning chimes going off in his head, or in his gut, so he didn't want to say he had a hunch, or a bad feeling.

Well, he had a sense of foreboding. But he wasn't sure if it was a warning, or if it was just a result of talking to Eris. She always left him so unnerved, and his stomach contemplating if it wanted to return his last mealâ€" he couldn't tell his stomach from his gut for a few hours after a visit with her. His only theory was that her propensity to chaos gave her an aura of discord, and that was what sent him on edge.

So, for now, he was instinctually blind. And he couldn't stand it. It was why he couldn't stand her.

Unable to answer Hiccup's unspoken question, Jack stood up.

"You and the princess have your dateâ€" "

"Jack!" Hiccup sputtered.

"I'll hunt down a set of disks." He grinned, only feeling a little bit sorry. He'd apologize laterâ€" if he thought about it.

For now, he had a job to do.

And, spinning the ring he wore on his middle left finger, he made a mental note to keep an eye out for mermaids.

## 25. Chapter 25

**\*\*Now that life has settled down a little, I'm trying to get through the Atlantis Arc so I can bring Rapunzel back into the story. You guys seem to like Eris, though...\*\***

**\*\*So, tiny explanationâ€" according to my (very) limited research, Eris originally comes from the Greek mythology. Since Disney has their **\*\*\_\*\*Hercules\*\*\_\*\*** movie, rather than rack my brain to come up with an original star system, I decided to just use that, so there's**

the Greece Star System, with each planet named for one of the Grecian city states. None of this is really important to the story, but in case you were wonderingâ€¦ \*\*

## Chapter 25

The smell of salt water, dead fish and ship grease was inescapable no matter which street Jack turned down as he made his way through the streets of the space port city. And amongst those was the undeniable taint of cheap alcohol. They all hung heavy in the air and clung to the back of his throat a little more with each breath he took. By the time he got to the market, the smell of rotting produce was just insult to injury.

A cool breeze blew off the ocean, nipping at his bare arms; though it wasn't strong enough to clear away the smell. It seemed to linger on his skin, seeping a little deeper with each passing moments. It didn't bother him, but he could still feel it.

He made his way into the city, following the directions he had gotten from one of the mechanics back at the landing bay.

Atlantis' surface was ninety percent water; the only landmasses consisted of islands and small continents. It was capable of supporting human life â€" provided said humans weren't opposed to copious amounts of sea food. Even now it functioned as a space port, its central location making it an ideal refueling stop, there was still more seafood options than anything else.

That the oceans on Atlantis were home to life was irrefutable. It was evident from the fish hung suspended from hooks in the window of every butcher shop he passed, and in the ice filled baskets of street merchants.

The debate was on just how intelligent that life was.

Rumors about mermaids living in the seas extended as far back as the planet's history. But there was no definite proof â€" only a few accounts that couldn't be proved, and a few things that couldn't really be explained.

So, there were pictures and images of mermaids everywhere. But if there were mermaids, they did an excellent job of hiding.

The first shop Jack stopped in said they didn't have a set of disksâ€¦ but it was so disorganized Jack doubted they would be able to find the disks even if they had them.

The second offered to order themâ€¦ at an exorbitant shipping charge on top of an already ridiculous retail price. Jack had glared at the young woman behind the counter, wondering if she had any idea about ship engines. She shrugged, and Jack wished it had been possible to slam the door on the way out. That was probably why the owners had gone to the trouble and expense of installing an automatic sliding door.

He headed in search of another shop, the air taking on a decided drop in temperature. For a moment he thought it was tied to his annoyance. But then he remembered that he wasn't on Warren. Clearly all this thought of mermaids had him mentally confused about where he

was.

His left hand flexed, fingers itching. But the bitter sea air didn't make any move in response. Rather, it seemed to ignore him completely as it continued its meandering way around the city. The movement had been so stupid he shoved his hand into the pocket of his vest, rolling his eyes at his own lapse. He tried not to feel too rejected by the wind as it seemed to blow right through him.

He shook his head to clear those thoughts as he started walking again.

He had just turned back onto the main avenue when a boy shouldered into his right side â€" the side where his hand wasn't in his pocket. It was sloppy, and obvious. Jack's hand jerked up, where he caught the boy's wrist just as it started to snake it way out of his vest.

Jack's annoyance doubled as he looked at the dark haired boy currently trying to wriggle out of his grip. The boy couldn't have been more than eight or nine, and his brown eyes returned Jack's blue glare, but not quite in equal measures.

"Really?" Jack asked, unable to keep the edge out of his voice. His hand tightened around the skinny wrist. "Was it no obvious I'm already having a bad day?"

"I didn't get anything!" The boy snapped. He flexed his fingers, emphasizing that his hand had come away empty.

Jack had had enough experience with pickpockets on Pallas I that he'd started keeping his wallet in an inside pocket. It was what North had taught him to do â€" but like a stubborn teenager it had taken the loss of his wallet on one of his trips into the city before he was willing to heed the older man's advice.

"How does that change the fact your hand was in my pocket?"

The boy just glaredâ€¦ then his eyes widened as Jack twisted the skinny arm, debating if he should try Hiccup's earlier trick and twist the boy's wrist back over his shoulder.

"Word to the wise â€" people who are already annoyed are the work people to try and steal from. Eventually you're going to mess with someone who can fight back, and they won't be in the mood to hold back."

"Like you, Freak?" the boy challenged, with a pointed glance at Jack's windswept white hair.

"You have no idea," Jack muttered.

Jack kept his left hand poised in case the boy tried to scream. The fact he didn't make any motion to do so told Jack the boy had a history with the authorities, and they wouldn't believe him even if he tried to twist the situation to his advantage. That was something Jack could use to his advantage.

"You're going to get cut down eventually, but I'm really not in the mood right now. So just tell me where I can buy ship parts, and I

won't hand you over to the authorities."

When the boy didn't answer, Jack rolled his eyes. "How is that not in appealing option?"

"Silver's," the boy said. "Two blocks down, take a right."

Jack let go, but not without a final twist of the boy's wrist for emphasis. He was fairly sure he hadn't been this vicious before his time in the Academy. And that left a bad taste in his mouth. With it came a twinge of guilt in the put of his stomach as the boy ran off, and Jack knew it wasn't just the lingering discord Eris had left him with.

The boy's "freak" comment made him pause to pull up the hood of the shirt he wore under his vest, covering his white hair. Some places people barely glanced at his hair. Others they stared, and occasionally names were hurled. So he covered his hair, save for the end of his bangs, which stuck out below the hem.

As he followed the directions he'd been given (keeping an eye out just in case), he wished he were on any planet. Because he highly doubted this would get any better, and he didn't want to see what it might bring out in him.

Two blocks down, on the corner, sat a small shot that advertised itself as Silver's Ship Supplies. Jack wondered if the alliteration was supposed to be clever, and it didn't reassure him in the slightest. The chipped paint on the sign, and grime on the edges of the front window set him on edge. But his instincts had calmed down since his encounter with Eris, so he trusted them when they said he wasn't walking right into a death trap.

A small bell over the door chimed to announce his entrance in a cheerful voice as he pushed the door open and stepped from the salty air into the durasteel and grease scent of the shop. If the smell was any indication, at least the workers would have some idea what they were doing. Even if they didn't, he was just relieved to step into a scent he enjoyed, and away from one that threatened to make him sick.

The grease was accented by the thick scent of wood polish; which was explained by the fact that the shop was made of mostly wood. Structurally, as well as all the shelves, cabinets and the front counter. An open bottle of polish sat on the counter, while a young man wiped a rag over the surface in circular motions under the watchful eye of a heavy set older man.

If the rest of the shop was any indication, it looked as though the young man had been slaving around the shop in a similar manner for weeks.

"Ya got t' take pride in yer work, Jimbo. Itâ€"Ah, look, a customer!" The man turned to Jack just as the young man rolled his eyes in exasperation. I'm Long John Silver, at yer service. How can we help ye, lad?"

Jack did his best to repress the shiver that ran down his spine as the man turned to look at him with a glowing red cybernetic eye. The man's deep voice was almost too cheerful, and Jack was tempted to

check that his wallet was still in the inside chest pocket of his vest.

The young man glanced at Jack with a near glare before he went back to polishing the counter.

The corner of Jack's mouth twitched in a grin, recognizing that expression from all the times North and Bunnymund had assigned him chores they claimed were "character building". When he'd complained, occasionally making comments about slave labor, they had laughed and spouted off some words of wisdom he hadn't been in a position to appreciate at the time; usually lines about the value of hard work. And somehow he had actually learned. Or at least stopped complaining after listening to the cadets showed him just how obnoxious it was.

"I'm looking for reset disks for a Berk Nadder 10-21 computer."

"A Berk Nadder, eh?" Silver raised his eyebrow. "Don't see many o' those round these parts."

Jack doubted that.

"Think ye can help him, Jim?" Silver asked, looking to his assistant.

"They're in back," Jim said, gesturing to the door behind the counter. "Come on."

#

"Dare I ask how you managed to ruin a Berk computer?" Jim asked, as he began to rifle through shelves filled with carious engine and computer parts. "I mean, aren't they supposed to be foolproof or something?"

"Someone who shouldn't have been in my cockpit," Jack said. "I'm developing a dislike of redheads."

"They're a handful," Jim said, shaking his head.

"You, too?"

"I only know one red head," Jim shrugged. "And she's a handful." He put back the first box.

'Handful' wasn't exactly the word Jack would use for Merida. 'Handful' would be a polite version of what he had in mind.

Jim pulled down a box from a shelf at about his eye level, and propped it between his hip and a lower shelf as he began to go through the contents.

Jack took the opportunity to glance around the storage room. More shelves and boxes covered most of the walls, with a few larger boxes stacked in one corner. At one of the few open spaces on the wall was a long work table strewn with spare parts, tools, and a few sheets of paper covered in what looked to be hand drawn designs.

A model solar sailor (a recreational vehicle Jack was only vaguely

familiar with) hung from the shelf above the table, while at one end was a 3D star map over a black holo projector. Instinct from his time at the Academy made him glance over the planets, with their small labels, in search of Warren. There was Burgess (a planet he hesitated to say he actually remembered as anything more than a name). But Warren was absent " just as it should be.

"It's Jim, right?" he asked.

"Jim Hawkins, yeah," he said, pushing his angled brown bangs out of his face as he reached for another box.

"Jack Frost." Just to keep them on equal footing. Jim seemed like the kind of person who would appreciate that. "Do you know anything about mermaids?"

\_Crash\_

Jack spun on his heel to see that Jim had dropped the box he had just been pulling down off the shelf. Its contents now lay scattered across the wooden floor. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Fine." But the answer was too quick. And just in case Jack wasn't already suspicious, he kept his head ducked as he crouched down and began to pick up the fallen contents of the box. "Why do you ask?"

"What?"

"About the mermaids."

Jack shrugged, keeping his tone easy. "Curiosity."

Actually, his list of reasons kept growing. First Eris comment about a mermaid being part of the brewing situation, now Jim's reaction to just the mention of the mermaids. And, if he was being honest, the way he caught himself spinning his ring made him wonder if maybe it wasn't also that he was looking for a piece of home.

Jim's mouth pursed as he put the box back on the shelf, and began going through another, a little faster than he had been before.

The air stretched with tension, thickening and weighing down on Jack he rubbed his forehead and tried to think of something to say that would alleviate it. He was spared having to come up with something when his commlink beeped on his belt, and he sighed a "thank you" under his breath as he pulled it out.

"Hiccup?"

There was a hesitation, which included a long exhale. "I'm running out of patience."

Jack snorted as he leaned back against one of the shelves. "Don't worry. You're still a better man than I am."

"Do you have the disks?"

"Not" " "

"Got 'em."

Jack glanced over to see Jim holding up a set of data disks, each in white paper holders with the Berk Engineering logo blazed across the front in red and black.

"Yes." He exhaled every bit of oxygen in his lungs, relieved to have something go right.

"Well, glad something's going right," Hiccup said. "It's too late to start â€" we might as well find a place to stay for the night."

"We're not going to stay on the ship?"

"I'm pretty sure you've reached your limit of nights in an enclosed space," Hiccup said, a dry chuckle entering his voice. "Besides, exposing Merida to the culture seems like a good idea."

"Are you trying to send her running for the ship?"

"Very funny," Hiccup muttered. "Any idea where we can stay?"

"Hey," Jim said, waving a hand to get Jack's attention.

Jack glanced over at the young man. "Hang on, Hiccup. Yeah?"

Jim sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "My mom owns an inn near the beach, if you need a room. The Benbow Inn."

Jack quirked an eyebrow as he turned back to the commlink. "Did you get that?"

"Got it," Hiccup said. "We'll meet you there?"

"If you insist on bringing her."

"Jack," Hiccup cautioned.

"I'll meet you there," Jack repeated, and cut off the link before turning back to Jim. "What's the damage for the disks?"

#

It took a bit of haggling, but eventually Jack talked Silver down to a price that didn't make him sick to his stomach as he handed over Hiccup's card and watched the man slide it. The price was still on the high side, but within reason for the most part.

As Silver handed over the bag Jim had put the disks into, he smiled with all the sincerity of a man who knew he was getting away with highway robbery. "If ya need anything else, ye know where t' find us, Lad."

"Right." Jack grit his teeth to keep from scowling as he took the bag with more force than necessary. "Thanks."

Toothiana had always told him it didn't cost anything to be nice. At the moment, he would have begged to differ. Of course, seeing as the fairy queen was a warrior in her own right, Jack had never been in



the habit of questioning her. Not to her face, at least.

He pushed the door open with his shoulder, the cheery voice of the bell adding insult to injury.

Remembering his run in with the pickpocket, he kept a firm grip on the bag as he started in the direction of the beach Him had directed him to.

The air still smell like salt water and dead fish, but his mood seemed to make it more acute.

"Hey!"

Glancing back, he saw Jim coming toward him down the sidewalk. He stopped and waited for the young man to catch up.

"I'm headed home for lunch," Jim said. "I can show you the way."

Jack was fairly sure he could find the inn without trouble on his own, but there also wasn't a reason not to accept. With the disks in his right hand, he slid his left into a pocket of his vest as he fell into step with Jim.

"So, you own a Nadder?" Jim asked.

Jack didn't miss the enthusiasm, and wasn't surprised. It certainly explained why Jim slaved away in a part's shop for a man like Silver.

"It's not mine," Jack said. "I'm just the pilot."

Technically he and Hiccup were equal (or at least almost equal) shareholders in their enterprises, for lack of a better word. But that was a nuance.

"That's still a pretty good position," Jim said. "As long as the red head isn't your boss, or something."

"That's too horrific to think about."

Jim chuckled, though Jack didn't see anything humorous in the thought of Merida as his boss. It was the stuff of nightmares, actually.

"So, why were you asking about mermaids?" Jim asked. "I mean, it doesn't seem like the kind of thing a spacer would be interested in. Fairytales, ya know?"

Jack glanced over at the hitch in Jim's voice at the word 'fairytales'. The young man wasn't trained at faking nonchalance, and that one move of his voice told Jack he knew more than he was letting on — and clearly had a reason for not letting on.

Jack shrugged. "I've seen a lot of things in the galaxy. I don't believe anything is just a fairytales."

Warren, a planet where nearly anything was possible, had trained him well.

Jim didn't respond, and when Jack glanced over he saw that he was frowning, clearly trying to get his head around what Jack had just said. That wasn't surprising either, since most people didn't grow up on a planet with fairies, abominable snowmen and talking wolves, and a north wind that responded to their commands. Jack couldn't expect most people to understand.

The rest of the walk, only a few minutes more, was wordless save for Jim's "up there" when the Benbo came into view when they rounded one of the bluffs.

It was a quaint, woken building. The inside was clean (though "well maintained" would have been a bit of an over statement, Jack though, eyeing a patch of chipped paint in the hallway), but the price was reasonable and it included meals. That wasn't something he could say no to.

Sarah Hawkins was visibly haggard, but her greeting was friendly, and the food she cooked was good.

"You couldn't wait?" Hiccup asked, as he and Merida approached the table where Jack was already half done with his lunch. The brunet didn't look upset, though "more amused, once you looked past the telltale signs of stress and exhaustion.

"I was hungry," Jack shrugged. He glanced at Merida, who was uncharacteristically quiet, looking down at the good grain of the table as though hoping it held the secrets of the universe if she could just figure out how to read them.

"I didn't know how long you would take," Jack added, looking back at Hiccup as he took a long drink of water. "Any good news?"

Hiccup shook his head, and Merida still didn't look up.

Taking another drink of water, Jack looked between them. He was fairly sure there was a "right thing" to say at the moment, but he didn't know what it was. So he went back to the only thing he could think to do: eating his meal. He had never been good at knowing what to say.

A few minutes later, after Sarah had taken the newcomers' orders, Hiccup turned to Jack.

"Now will you tell me what's up with you?"

Jack's finer motor functions lapsed for a moment, and his fork hit the plate with a violent clink as he looked up.

"What do you mean?" But it was too fast even to his own ears.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "I haven't spent the last six months with you and learned nothing. Something's been bothering since we dropped out of hyperspace."

"Slightly after that," Jack said. "Nagging suspicion, mostly."

"Ya think somethin's wrong?" Aside from telling Sarah what she wanted to eat, it was the first thing Merida had said since she and Hiccup

arrived back at the Benbow.

He took advantage of having to chew his food to give himself a chance to think over the right way to word his response. He still didn't feel like mentioning Eris " but he figured her might have to.

"Ye can sense it too," Merida said, eyes narrowing ever so slightly as she looked at him.

Jack nodded, looking up to meet her gaze. He recognized her expression " she understood intuition, and she had instincts like his. Maybe not as fine-tuned, since she probably hadn't been exposed to the same situations. But he could appreciate having someone to compare notes with for the first time since he had left Warren.  
"You?"

Merida hummed an affirmative as she nodded.

Fingering a piece of bread crust on the edge of his plate, Jack asked: "Have you ever heard of Eris?"

Merida shook her head, but Hiccup (shot on instincts but long on knowledge) asked: "Isn't she the goddess of chaos on Athens or something?" Hiccup asked.

"The entire Grecian system," Jack corrected. "But the Greeks are always looking for something new to worship. Most of their deities are nothing of the sort. Eris is an entity, though I'm not sure how to explain \_what\_ she is. She drifts through the galaxy, drawn to wherever the largest source of chaos is. There's more to it, since I doubt Gothel's fits are \_ever\_ the largest source of chaos in a galaxy this big. But trying to get a straight answer from her is trying to get blood from a stone."

"You've met her?" Hiccup asked.

"She was on the ship," Merida guessed. "That's what I felt just after we came out of hyperspace, wasn't it?"

Jack nodded. "She's here on Atlantis. Well, close enough. She can't enter a planet's atmosphere. I've had several run-ins with her. All she would tell me this time is that a mermaid's involved somehow."

Merida balked visibly. "\_Mermaids\_? Frost, they're just myths."

"Hang on." Jack held up a hand, and swallowed the bite of food he had just taken. "You accept that I had a visit from Eris " who most people, of the few who have ever heard of her, regard as a myth. But you can't accept there are mermaids?"

Merida started to reply, but paused as Sarah brought her and Hiccup's food. When she had returned the kitchen, Merida turned back to Jack.

"Last I heard, mermaids on Atlantis had been disproved as the cabin fever crazed delusions of sailors who saw manatees sunning' on the rocks before Atlantis moved up t' space travel," Merida said.

"That's actually impressive." Picking up the piece of braid that was the remainder of his lunch, Jack leaned his chair onto its back legs, pulling off a strip of the crisp crust. "My guess, though, is that that whole thing is that someone couldn't find the mermaids and tried to come up with a logical explanation, or really did see manatees and assumed that's what all the others had seen. Hiccup â€" do you think it's possible there are mermaids here on Atlantis?"

Hiccup set his fork down, pressing his knuckles to his mouth as he looked down at his half full plate, his green eyes out of focus as he mentally analyzed whatever information he had stored in his mind to come up with a logical answer.

As he waited, Jack fingered the crust of bread in his hand, pressing all the air out of the soft white inside that had clung to the crust when he tore it off. Absently he took a bite of the crust, chewing while he waited for Hiccup's thorough mental process.

"We have dragons on Berk," Hiccup said, with a small smile as he leaned back in his seat. "Not as many as we did, since we killed so many of them off before we gained the brain capability to build starships â€" how we managed that is a mystery to me, since most Vikings are still more interested in smashing things than they are in building."

"Remind me not to go there any time soon," Merida muttered.

"Took the words out of my mouth," Jack said.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. "My point is: if there are dragons, why can't there be mermaids?"

"Have ye soon a dragon?" Merida asked.

A shadow passed over Hiccup's expression as he looked down at his plate again, fingers tightening around his fork with tension that turned his knuckles white.

"Yeah," he said, in a tight whisper that sounded close to breaking. "Yeah, I have."

Jack took a bite from the bread crust and did his best to hide his smirk. But Merida turned on him like a predator going in for the kill.

"Alright, fine: There be dragons on Berk." Merida waved a hand as though dismissing the possibility that was somehow evidence in Jack's case. "But have ye ever seen a mermaid?"

"On Atlantis, no," Jack said.

Merida smirked.

"But on my homeworld I have."

Her smirk slipped, but not fully. "They have mermaids on Burgess?"

Lowering his chair back to an upright position, he picked up what

was left of the bread crust to swab up the streaks of sauce that were the last remnants of his meal. "Not Burgess. Warren."

"You're from \_Warren\_?" Merida's eyes widened again. "Is there anything about your life that \_isn't\_ straight out o' myth?"

Jack just shrugged and took a bite of the bread crust that was now saturated with the sauce.

Still, that argument only stopped Merida in her tracks for a moment. "Ye've actually \_seen\_ the mermaids?"

Pulling off the ring from his left middle finger, Jack held it out to her.

She frowned before taking it, holding it up to the light so she could examine the ring. The band was platinum, but the part that made it unique was small, oblong disk on the front. For a moment she turned it, examining the way the light caught the disk and turned it from blue to green. Finally she looked up at him. "What is it?"

"It's from a mermaid scale," he said. "It was a thank you gift."

"So, because there're mermaids on \_Warren\_, a place most people don't believe exists in the first place, you're convinced there are mermaids on Atlantis, though the only proof you've got is the word of a chaos obsessed alien with delusions of grandeur." She gave the ring one final look over and offered it back to him.

"You're more observant than I gave you credit." Jack took the ring back and returned it to its place on his finger. He flexed his fingers. He had barely taken it off since he was sixteen, and he hadn't realized his hand would feel naked without it.

"So we have to run the reset disks, discover a mythological species, and find out whatever is happening that would draw Eris," Hiccup said. "Am I missing anything?"

Jack shook his head.

"And here I thought I gave up questing when I left Berk." Hiccup raised his glass in a mock toast, and Jack returned it with a smirk.

Merida rolled her eyes and turned her attention back to her meal.

## 26. Chapter 26

\*\*Well, that didn't take long at all! Please note my sarcasm, because I had really hoped to have this chapter finished long before now.\*\*

\*\*So, as I said on tumblr: If I'm learning one thing from this arc, it's the Jim Hawkins has a lot of fans!.\*\*

\*\*Also, I know nothing about engines of any kind " not even the first rule. I didn't even know how to spell hydraulics until

spellcheck corrected me while I was typing up this chapter. So, don't trust anything Jack says in this chapter as solid mechanical advice. Yeah. Sorryâ€|\*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 26\_

"So, do we draw straws for who goes back to the ship?" Jack asked, holding up the set of seven reset disks, each in their individual white paper envelopes, held together with a rubber band.

"And have you mess the computer up further?" Hiccup rolled his eyes and snatched the disks out of Jack's hand. "Please!"

Jack started to grin, but it fell as Hiccup's words fully sunk in. "Hey!" He had expected Hiccup to take the disks â€" but he hadn't expected the jibe.

Hiccup smirked back over his shoulder as he left Jack sitting at the table with Merida and the plates they had used for their lunch. A smirk that told Jack he had just paid for his "date" joke back on \_The Stormfly\_. So much for Jack's intention to apologize later.

Hiccup was just at the doorway of the dining room when Jack registered a bigger problem.

"Wait! What am I supposed to do with her?" he asked, gesturing to Merida.

"I'm right here!" Merida snapped.

But Jack didn't glance over at her, choosing instead to stare at Hiccup, who only waved over his shoulder and didn't even pause on his way to the inn's front door.

"Now that's just mean," Jack muttered.

"Could say the same 'bout you," Merida said.

Jack shot her a glareâ€| but decided it wasn't worth wasting his breath. So instead he just rolled his eyes as he rose from his seat and gathered up their plates.

"What are ya doin' with those?"

"Helping out," he said, carrying the plates toward the open doorway that led to the kitchen. He tapped the toe of his boot against the doorjamb to announce himself as he stepped through.

"Oh, Jack, you didn't have to do that," Sarah said, looking up from the sink where she was already up to her elbows in suds and all the other dishes from lunch â€" flatware, silverware, pots, and pans covered in remnants of everything she had cooked.

Jack just shrugged. "It's no problem."

The last word was pretty much drowned out by the sound of boots stomping across the wood floor. A door on the other side of the of

the kitchen swung open to admit Jim Hawkins " in a very visible hurry.

"I'm headed back to work, Mom," he said, shrugging into his brown leather jacket as he headed for the back door. "See you later!"

He was out the door as he called out the last words. Jack recognized the speed of someone trying to get out of something they knew they were supposed to be doing. It would have been amusing, except for the way Sarah called after him, the words dying on her lips halfway before she sighed and gave up.

"What am I going to do with that boy?" she asked. "He acts like I don't know that he doesn't need to be back at work for more than half an hour."

"I can help out if you need," Jack offered.

"I can't ask you to do that," Sarah said. She took the plates from him and added them to the sink.

"Don't worry about it," he said. He took off his gauntlet and vest, setting them on a nearby shelf.

Sarah sighed, but didn't protest further as she picked up a dish towel and Jack took her place at the sink.

Sarah sighed, but didn't protest further as she picked up a dish towel and Jack took her place at the sink. He plunged his arms into the warm dishwater, and went to work at the plates soaking in the water. It was hard to believe a few years earlier he had complained whenever he was assigned dishwashing duty back on Warren.

Why is he so eager to get back to work?" Jack asked, curiosity getting the better of him as he handed Sarah the first clean plate.

"He's not actually going to work," Sarah said. "He's going back to whatever he's tinkering on this week. Silver pays him a commission for anything he fixes. Lately he seems hell bent on earning as much as he can " so he's there more often than not."

"Independence is a big deal at eighteen," Jack said, handing over another plate.

But even as she took the plate, Sarah shook her head. "No, I think it's more than that. At first, it was. But for the past few months he's been" different."

"How so?"

"More focused," she said. "Ever since his father left he seems to think the galaxy is out to get him. Up until a few months ago he was barely staying out of juvenile hall."

Jack glanced up from the crusted plate he was scrubbing. "What changed?"

"I wish I knew," she said. "At first I thought maybe it was a girl. But this city is small enough I would have seen or heard something by

now, if that were the case."

Considering Jack had seen how much a boy would change to get a girl's attention. For several months he had been on the verge of hating Katherine, convinced she had stolen his best friend when Nightlight had first become enamored with her. So he wasn't willing to rule out Jim's attitude adjustment being tied to someone of the female persuasion. Especially when he remembered the young man's tone when they had talked about red heads.

It took a little over half an hour for Jack to finish all the dirty fishes, exchanging small talk with Sarah while he mulled over the scattered pieces he had gathered so far.

"I won't let you help anymore," she said, taking the last pot from him. "You're a paying guest. Take this as my thanks, though."

From the fridge she pulled out a small plate with a piece of pie covered in a thin layer of plastic film.

"Another dirt dish for me to clean?" Jack asked, smirking as he took the plate.

Sarah laughed, handing him a fork and shooed him out the kitchen.

Taking the pie, Jack headed out the back door. Once in the fresh air he glanced around to get his bearings and figure out where to go while he ate. He took a seat on the edge of the cliff that looked out over the ocean. It seemed as good a place as any to think. And the air didn't smell like dead fish, which was certainly a plus on this planet.

The ocean was flat, with nothing marring the smooth line of the horizon, save for a few small islands that were little more than small ridges on the horizon. On the beach a few people sat on the sand, with only two or three brave enough to risk the waters that probably couldn't be called "warm" by any stretch of the imagination. Not with the nip in the rapidly cooling air. He wasn't sure whether to be surprised or impressed as he watched a figure break through the crest of a wave and push back a mass of red hair that held its curl even when soaked with salt water.

Merida.

He decided to be impressed. Just a little.

Other than that, there were no visible signs of life in the water. It wasn't like Warren, where the mermaids were always coming to the surface to see whatever was going on. If there was one thing they were, curious was the perfect word. Fierce, but curious. It was a strange combination, but one you got used to quickly on Warren.

He really needed to stop thinking about home.

He needed to stop thinking of Warren as home, since going back wasn't an option.

#



"Shouldn't Hiccup be back by now?" Merida asked, leaning in the doorway between their joined rooms.

Jack only glanced at her from the corner of his eyes before he turned his attention back to his datapad.

"Not for a few more hours," he said. "And that door is supposed to be locked for a reason."

Merida groaned in frustration as she turned back into her own room, slamming the door shut behind her. He heard her stomp two steps, pause, then stomp back to the door and throw it open again. "Yer a real pain in the neck, ya know tha?"

"So I've been told," he said, not looking up from the news article he'd been reading. Why he was reading about a trade dispute in the Yomar system he had no idea — boredom was the only explanation could think of. And after several hours of nothing to do, he was more bored than he had been in a long time.

He should be searching for more evidence of whatever was about to happen. But for the moment he wasn't sure where to look. And he was a little wary of leaving Merida alone for extended periods of time. So there he was — reading a news article on trade disputes in the Yomar system, babysitting a spoiled red head who hated his guts. It certainly wasn't how he wanted to spend his day.

Merida stayed in the doorway for the space of several heartbeats, probably trying to think of a comeback — but in the end she just slammed the door with more force than before, so the pictures rattled against the wall, and stomped away.

"That was almost too easy," Jack muttered.

He couldn't bring himself to go back to the article now that he'd had a distraction. Instead he shut off his datapad and tossed it onto the bed as he stood up from the desk chair.

Military training compelled him to just take a look around. It would be more interesting than just sitting there, so he figured he might as well. With lunch over, the run was pretty much silent, with everyone either gone or in their rooms. When he glanced into the dining room he heard the sounds from the kitchen that he guessed were Sarah preparing for dinner.

The grounds weren't spacious, and certainly nothing special to look at. The Benbow was a practical place for spacers temporarily waylaid on Atlantis. There was something almost desperate, hopeless, about the place. Tough crab grass grew in sparse patches across the otherwise barren landscape. Easily defensible, since it was impossible for anyone to sneak up on. But not somewhere Jack wanted to stay for more than a few days.

He rounded to the back of the inn, where the ground fell away to form a cliff above the edge of the ocean, where the waves crashed endlessly against the rocks that jutted up out of the water. A dead end, in every sense of the phrase.

A week here and Merida would probably be running for him. Jack smirked at that thought, then filed it away as he caught sight of a

solar sailor perched near the edge of the cliff, The sail was rolled up to the mast, the engines powered down. An open toolbox, and a span of tools were scattered through the sparse crab grass, leading up to where Jim crouched over the vehicle's motor.

"Impressive," Jack said, hands in his vest pockets as he neared the solar sailor, careful not to step on a hydrosprayer.

Jim glanced up, grinning with all the pride of a mechanic who had poured their blood, sweat and tears into an engine. "Thanks. Built it myself."

"Nice." Jack crouched down next to him to look at the engine inside. "I don't know much about solar sailors, but it looks good. Though, if you move the hydraulics so the connectors are straight, it will reduce engine strain."

Jim rubbed his chin, looking at the hydraulic connections Jack had gestured to.

"That would also give you more space to move the thrusters aft for finer balance."

"For someone who doesn't know much about solar sailors, you're pretty good."

"I built a hoverboard while I was at the Academy," Jack said, running the back of his knuckles over the well-polished board.

The truth was, he had missed flying with the wind, and he'd hoped the hoverboard would relieve some of the ache. It had, for a while. Until he'd crashed, busting both the board and his collarbone, as well as sustaining a couple cracked ribs, and a few other cuts and bruises. He'd had to take care of them himself (with occasional help from Eep at Crood's Diner), since admitting his injuries to anyone at the Academy would have gotten him expelled. By the time he'd finished healing, he'd found himself numb to any lingering sense of homesickness, so he hadn't bothered to rebuild the hoverboard. By that point, he hadn't cared.

At some point over the past six months, that numbness had started to fade, though he wasn't sure how. Maybe that was why everything â€" his returning homesickness, as well as his frustrations with Eris and Merida â€" felt so severe. He was actually feeling them.

Jim pulled him out of his thoughts. "You attended the Imperial Flight Academy?"

Jack nodded.

"I've been thinking about attending," Jim said.

Jack turned to stare at him, momentarily too stunned to speak, as he thought about everything he had hated about the Academy. From the formality and strict rules (enforced curfews and limitations on where you could go and when), the lack of privacy in the form of frequent room inspections, not to mention the uniforms. He reached over to scratch the inside of his left elbow at just the memory of the uniforms.

"\_Why?\_" he asked.

"Why did you?" Jim asked, an edge of challenge creeping into his tone. Not that Jack could really blame him.

"Because I was stupid," Jack said honestly, standing up. "Trust me when I say: it's not worth it." He tried to grin, to soften what had come out harsher than he'd intended. "Besides, you don't strike me as the uniform type. And that dress uniform is a torture device."

"That I'll buy," Jim muttered.

"They'd probably make you buzz your hair, too" to make it even." Jack cast a pointed glance at the small braid at the base of Jim's neck, and buzzed hair on the lower half of his head.

"Did they make you?"

"I couldn't get it under control," Jack sighed, running a hand through hair. "By the time it grew back, I learned how to use hair gel." He'd actually gone to a hair salon to learn how to control his hair. Something he hoped he never had to do again.

Jim smirked, clearly amused at the thought.

#

"I had an idea," Jack said, as soon as Hiccup opened the door of their room and came in.

"We could use one of those right about now," Hiccup sighed. He rubbed his face as he flopped back onto his bed. "Shoot."

Leaving the chair at the desk, Jack took a seat on the edge of his own bed.

"What if we got Merida a job here at the Benbow?"

Hiccup lifted the forearm over his eyes to look at Jack with incredulity. "You've lost it. Didn't we already establish she can't wait tables? I'm pretty sure cleaning hotel rooms would be even worse."

"There's more," Jack said, waving him off. "When we leave here, we call her parents, tell them where she is" by the time they get here she'll probably be begging to go home."

Hiccup lay quietly for several moments, eyes out of focus as he weighed the pros and cons of Jack's suggestion. Finally he lifted his head and shoulders, bracing his elbows behind him. "I'm not seeing a down side to this."

"Should I be offended that you sound surprised?"

Hiccup ignored that, sitting up fully. "We could actually make that work. Are they" "

"They're hiring" I already asked," Jack said.

"You really want her off the ship," Hiccup chuckled.

"I thought we'd established that."

He wouldn't exactly wish her on Sarah Hawkins, but he didn't have any other ideas, and this one was mostly harmless. Most of his ideas were, which was why he never understood why people were so apt to give him a hard time even when they worked.

#

Jack had thought he would be able to sleep as soon as they finished dinner and went up their rooms. Hiccup fell asleep quickly.

But Jack found himself lying awake, tossing and turning in a bed that quickly went from comfortable to stifling. Hiccup had turned the heater up to a point Jack found almost stifling, which made it hard to relax enough for sleep to reach him. His thoughts weren't helping. They tossed as much as his body did, until they were tangled up in Eris and her riddles, the corrupted computer on The Stormfly, Merida, and other shadowed thoughts that moved too fast for him to pin them and decipher exactly what they were.

Part of his mind went back to the landing hours earlier, imagining all the things that could have gone wrong. If he had miscalculated by just a few inches, it triggered a sense of dread in his gut all over again, as though he were about to make the landing again. Jack shook his head to clear the sense. He had already made the landing, and done so without a scratch to the paintjob or any damage to the landing gears. The only thing wrong with the ship was the computer.

A computer that controlled every aspect of the ship "including the engines and life support. Merida had corrupted the landing gear. But it could so easily have been the engines themselves, and they would have been stranded in space for who knew how many eons. He doubted emergency signals were picked up as often as they needed to be. Or it could have been the life support. Well, at least then they would have died quickly from lack of oxygen, instead of starving as supplies ran out.

Jack reminded himself that it had just been the landing program, but his stomach still twisted in anxiety.

And there was the possibility that he and Hiccup would run out of money while they were here. What happened if they couldn't get another job and couldn't afford to refuel next time they needed it.

All these thoughts were stupid, he told himself, and rolled over onto his back in the hope that changing his physical position would affect his mental position. The ceiling above him was painted white, but the moonlight coming through the window gave it a blue tint.

Against his better judgment he turned his head to look out the window. Two moons hung in the midnight sky. Beautiful "but a reminder that he was probably still being watched by the Man In The Moon, even all these light years away from Warren. That triggered the stale resentment he had thought he was past. But it quickly took the place of the lingering dread, festering like a wound that refused to heal. As it grew, it scrubbed away the wash of homesickness that had

been welling up in him ever since his last days at the Academy.

He'd been running from the responsibility foisted on him by a ruler who barely gave him the time of day. Who had told him his name when he had woken up half in the waters of the pond in the Winter Territory, then barely said a word to him. He wasn't Nightlight, the fortunate favorite, who always seemed to do everything right. Or Katherine, adored by everyone. If she couldn't sleep she would have half the governors crowding into her room to sing her lullabies.

No. He was Jack Frost, with no past, a penchant for breaking rules, and no answers to the questions that forever lingered at the hazy borders of his mind. Of them all, he was the most easily susceptible to the Fearlings because of his lingering fears and doubts. No matter what the others said or did, the shadows always had a direct path to him.

Giving up on sleep, he got out of bed and left the room so he wouldn't disturb Hiccup. He considered grabbing his boots, which sat next to the bed, but he shrugged away the thought.

It was late enough that he was the only one in the halls, which almost unnerved him. An inn filled with spacers should have some kind of movement no matter what the hour. But it was quiet â€" almost eerily so as he made his way down stairs he could see only by the moonlight coming through the window on the landing.

He paused at the base of the stairs to look around, taking in the unfamiliar shadows.

Taking a deep breath of the air that was strangely cool after the sauna Hiccup had created, Jack rubbed his bare chest and looked around. His senses told him there was somewhere he needed to be. It was just a matter of figuring out where.

With one more glance around, he headed for the back door. A shiver passed down his spine as he stepped out into the night air, which was considerably cooler than the air inside. But after a moment he adjusted to the sudden shift.

As he made his way down the rocky steps to the beach, he found himself wishing he'd put on his boots before leaving the room. His pride wouldn't allow him to wish he'd grabbed his jacket as well. It was the principle of the issue. He was Jack Frost, after allâ€¦

It was beside the point when he made it to the beach, where rocks gave way to gravel, gave way to soft sand. He went up to where the waves lapped at the shore in layers of water and foam, over the packed, drenched sand, to embrace his bare feet. The hem of his pajama pants were instantly weighed down by the salt water.

Jack looked out across the water, doing his best not to look up at the moons overhead. At one point he found his gaze drifting upwards. But he stubbornly returned it to the horizon before the moons came into view.

Thankfully, before he could start looking upwards again, the sound of murmured voices made him look to his left.

After a moment he followed the sounds, around rocks that jutted out

from the cliff, blocking his view. When he saw what they had been hiding, he came to a dead stop, staring.

"You've got to be kidding me."

He recognized Jim's silhouette crouched at the edge of the water, while a second figure came out of a crashing wave and took his hand. A tail flipped up out of the water, green scales glistening in the moonlight.

## 27. Chapter 27

\*\*My goal is to have this up on November 7th (my birthday). Then I'll have a couple days to geek out about the new Thor movie. Then I'll have to start prepping for \*\*\_\*\*Frozen\*\*\_\*\* and \*\*\_\*\*The Day Of The Doctor\*\*\_\*\* (I'm not sure which one I'm more excited about).\*\*

\*\*For Ariel and Jim, I tried to combine pieces from both their movies for how they met. Including the fork. Poor Jackâ€|\*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 27\_

"You've gotta be kidding me," Jack said â€" again. He looked between Jim and the red haired mermaid, whose tail had vanished when her green scales fell away to reveal legs. Jack was still trying to process that one, even now the three of them were seated at a thick slab of a wooden table in the inn's kitchen.

The mermaid, Ariel, wore the shirt Jim had taken off and offered her, and the fabric practically drowned her tiny figure. Even with the cuffs rolled back twice, the sleeves covered her hands, which were currently wrapped around the mug of hot chocolate in front of her on the table. When they'd gotten back to the inn (a wordless walk up the steps) Jack had needed to do something to calm his racing thoughts. Three mugs of hot chocolate had been the result, though the state of his thoughts hadn't improved noticeably.

"How does this happen?" Jack muttered, running his hands over his face. Someday, he hoped to understand how he always ended up in the middle of world changing events. He could never land on a planet to find the excitement was on a different continent. No, without trying he always ended up in a place at a time, just as the disaster started, and around the people the disaster was centered on.

Like now â€" which brought his attention back to the couple sitting across from him.

He looked through his fingers at Ariel, whose wide blue eyes wandered around the kitchen, drinking in the myriad of details around her. She fidgeted in her seat, as though she wanted to get up and explore. Jack had already had to swat her hand away from the stove while he had made the hot chocolate, when she'd reached for the flame in the burner.

Jack shook his head. "This is ridiculous."

"I don't see the problem," Jim said. "My girlfriend is a mermaid. Why

is that such a big deal?"

Jack grimaced at the question, because he realized he didn't really have the answer. He wasn't sure what the problem was, only that there was one, and it wasn't going to be pretty when it came out. But riddles weren't answered, and he knew Jim wouldn't listen. "It'sâ€¦ complicated."

"Why?" Jim asked, tone saturated with challenge, glaring at him.

It took all Jack's self-control not to glare right back. He was pretty sure he could have stared Jim down. But at the moment he wasn't in the mood. Not with the pressure building in the back of his head. Instead, he looked back at Arielâ€¦ only to find he wasn't sure what to say.

"Ariel, right?"

She nodded. "And you'reâ€¦ Jack?"

"Jack Frost." Not that it mattered.

"You must be a warrior," she said, leaning toward him across the table with a child's wide eyed wonder. North would like this oneâ€¦. "Are you the guard of this place?"

Jack blinked. "What?"

"Your gauntlet," she said, gesturing to it. "In Atlantica, only the royal guards wear gauntlets."

Jack looked down at the gauntlet on his left forearm. He ran his fingers over the cool metal, tracing the snowflake â€" the emblem of the Winter Territory â€" embossed on the front. In a way, it was right. The snowflake marked him as the guardian of his territory. Not that he was doing a very good job of that, thousands of light years away. "That's complicated too."

"Jim says that a lot too," she said, her nose crinkling as she turned back to her hot chocolate. Jim rolled his eyes. She was unbelievably cheerful for four o'clock in the morning. "Why is everything so complicated for humans?"

"Because we say 'complicated' when it's hard to explain," Jack said. "A lot of things are."

"I don't think so."

Jack inclined his head slightly, admitting she was right. "Or, when we don't \_want\_ to explain."

"Which one is it now?"

"I don't want to explain my past," he said, tapping his gauntlet. "Why your relationship is a problem is beyond my ability. Especially this early in the morning."

"Hmm." She took a sip of her hot chocolate.

Jack rubbed his face again. Her cheerfulness was reminding him that

he was already exhausted. The pain in his head was growing, which certainly didn't help the matter. She was so expressing, her face shifting with the slightest change in her mood, like a young child. It was a dizzying array.

"How old are you? Twelve?"

"I'm sixteen," she huffed.

In that huff, he saw a flash of Merida's stubbornness. Maybe it was a redhead thing.

"Right. Sixteen." Not a good age, if he remembered correctly. He seemed to recall Aster hurling the word 'brat' a lot when he'd been sixteen. It was the age of being convinced you understood the universe better than anyone else " especially anyone older than you.

Ariel bounced back quickly, her smile returning. "Where are you from?"

"Warren."

"Where's that?" she asked.

"Hand on," Jim said, at the same time. "\_Warren\_? As in \_the Warren\_?"

"Yes, \_the\_ Warren," Jack said, wishing he had thought more before he'd answered. He looked back at Ariel. "I don't mean to be rude, but how do you have legs? The mermaids on Warren can't change."

"There are mermaids on your world?" she asked, face lighting up with curiosity. "I thought we were the only ones in the galaxy."

"I've heard about them on a few worlds, but not many," Jack said. "but, your legs." He made a mental note that she was easily distracted.

"We change as soon as we dry off after we get out of the water," she said. "It's actually getting out that's hard." Her nose wrinkled again, and he realized it was an expression of dislike " for things like the word 'complicated' and trying to get in and out of the ocean with a tail.

"And you'll change back as soon as you're wet?"

Ariel nodded. "The mermaids on your world don't change?"

He shook his head. If he were more awake, he would have been tempted to splash her just to see what would happen.

"What about you two?" he asked, gesturing at them. "Do I want to know how this happened?"

Jim glanced over at Ariel, who just looked back at him wide eyed. After a moment, he sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

"A few months ago I was, uh" I flew my sailer over restricted space, and the cops saw. I mean, it shouldn't be a big deal. It's an



old construction site that was abandoned, or something. It's not dangerous, I guess it's just private property or something. No one got hurt, and it's not like I broke anything." There was an unspoken "\_this time\_" at the end that weighed heavy in the air.

Jack slumped in his seat, almost wishing he hadn't asked.

"I flew out over the ocean to lose the droids. Just as I started to swing back around to come home, something went wrong with the engine and I crashed into the water. I passed out, but Ariel swam me to shore."

Jack glanced at the mermaid with a glimmer of admiration. Small as she was, she didn't look strong enough to accomplish that.

"She left just as I started to come to, so I only caught a glimpse of her, so at first I thought maybe she was a dream."

And this was the part where it turned into a love story. Jack slumped a little further in his seat.

"The next day my sailor was on the beach, and I knew the tides couldn't have washed it up. I would catch glimpses of her from the corner of my eye, then I started finding things on a small ledge on the cliff down by the beach â€" large shells, an old fork. Then one day I found her hiding behind some rocks. The tide had gone out, but there were people on the beach so she was scared to make a run for it." Jim shrugged. "We've been meeting up on the beach for the past few months."

Jack looked at Ariel. "Why a fork?"

He had heard of some strange courtship rituals (he was still trying to figure out what the big deal about flowers was), but he was fairly sure a fork was the strangest yet.

She shrugged. "I liked it."

"You liked it," he repeated, blinking as he tried to comprehend that. "A \_fork\_?"

She nodded. "I found it in an old shipwreck, and I liked it."

"So you just left things you liked, hoping you'd get his attention?"

She nodded again.

Jack stared at her from a moment, but realized it actually made sense â€" in a strange way he couldn't explain. He shook his head and leaned back.

He was having a hard time seeing what the problem was. Two teenagers shouldn't be enough to warrant Eris' attention.

"We only get to see each other a couple times a week." Jim glanced out the window, to where the sun was starting to peak above the horizon. "And now she has to go back soon."

"No."

They both looked at Ariel."

"I'm not going back," she said, tone resolute.

That, Jack realized, could be a problem.

#

Jack opened the door as quietly as he could, but Hiccup still lifted his head from his pillow to look at him through heavy lidded, blurry eyes.

"Jack? What are you doing up?"

"Hoping this is a bad dream," he muttered going back over to his own bed and flopping into it. His head was throbbing, and all he wanted was to sleep and wake up to find that everything since they'd left Caledonia had been just a dream. "But I doubt it."

That would be too easy.

Rolling away from the window, he pulled the blankets over his head to block out the growing light coming through the glass.

#

"Look who finally decided to rejoin the living."

Jack glowered at Hiccup (which quickly wiped the grin off his friend's face) and practically fell into a chair at the table Hiccup and Merida were already sitting at in the inn's dining room. He was nowhere near ready to be awake, and all he wanted to do was crawl back into bed and continue to wish this was all a bad dream. He wasn't even sure why he'd gotten up, he wasn't even hungry enough to think maybe it was the thought of breakfast. Actually, the smells coming from the kitchen threatened to turn his stomach.

And his head still felt as though it would split apart. The clatter of cutlery on ceramic plates, and the buzz of conversation from the other tables was no helping in the slightest.

"You okay?" Hiccup asked.

Jack pushed aside the plate in front of him, shook his head, then rested his head on his forearms.

"Was I dreaming, or did you come in at four in the morning?"

"I wish you were dreaming," Jack muttered. He picked up the fork, turning it over in his fingers as he tried to figure out why anyone in their right mind could find the thing fascinating.

"What were ya doin' atâ€œ"

Merida stopped, and all three of them looked over as a small figure came toward them. Well, Hiccup and Merida looked. Jack glanced at the red head just long enough to see who it was, then buried his face in his arms. There went any last hope of it being a dream. Not that he'd had much.

"Here you go, Jack." She set a glass of water on the table beside him. Her voice was insanely cheerful, stabbing into his head like a spike.

"Thanks, Ariel," he sighed (because he had a feeling that ignoring all Toothiana's lessons about courtesy would just make his headache worse at the moment). He lifted his head so he could take a long drink, in hopes that maybe his headache was induced by dehydration. The ice water slid down, cooling the inside of his throat so fast a shiver rippled up his spine.

"Can I get you something to eat?" she asked.

He glanced over, and saw she wore a white apron over a simple blue dress she had gotten from somewhere. Somehow, she had gotten the waitress position Sarah had mentioned the day before. Well, there went that idea for getting Merida off the ship.

"I don't care," he said, in response to her question. He pressed his wrist to the bridge of his nose, in hopes of easing some of the pressure behind his eyes.

"O-okay." She nodded and went back to the kitchen.

"How'd ya know her name?" Merida asked, clearly suspicious.

"She's Jim's girlfriend," he said. "And they're the reason my head feels like it's about to explode. Why do I always end up involved?"

Hiccup and Merida didn't answer, just looked down at their plates.

Jack buried his face again â€" the sunlight coming through the windows was starting to hurt his eyes. The only thing that could make this morning worse was if Eris showed up to 'check on his progress' as she said, as though she were some kind of supervisor. Thankfully, she couldn't enter a planet's atmosphere, so he was safe from that.

"So that's the mermaid?" Merida asked suddenly, her voice low enough it wouldn't carry beyond their table.

Jack nodded as best he could without lifting his head from his arms.

"If she's a mermaid, where's her tail?"

"They change, apparently," he said. "I couldn't sleep last night so I went for a walk, and found them on the beach. So, I'm guessing they're the 'forbidden love' Eris mentioned."

"What's so forbidden?" Hiccup asked.

"If I knew, maybe my head wouldn't hurt so bad," was all Jack could say. He couldn't even bring himself to apologize for the edge in his voice.

"I'll be right back," Merida said suddenly after a moment.

Jack cracked his eyes open to watch her stand up and walk away, but once she left his line of vision he didn't know where she went, and he closed his eyes again.

They were silent, save for the sound of Hiccup eating â€" Jack couldn't have moved if he wanted to. And he couldn't even find the will to want to. Not when his head felt as though it would shatter if he moved it too much. And it went like that for an hour or two â€" that was how it felt to Jack, at least. Though in reality it was just a couple minutes.

"You're not dying, are you?" Hiccup asked.

"I don't think so," Jack said. "My head just hurts."

"You sure?"

"No." That was a bit of an exaggeration. But he could barely move, and the pain was so much he couldn't imagine it ever abating.

"I have to go check on the ship," Hiccup said.

Jack waved a hand, gesturing him for him to go. "Have fun."

"Are you gonna be okay?"

Jack groaned noncommittally.

"Call me if you need help, okay?"

He waved his hand again. Talking was taking too much energy that he didn't have.

With his eyes still closed, he heard Hiccup hesitate for a minute, but eventually he walked away, footsteps receding. And Jack was left alone in the half full dining room, with nothing but the thoughts in his pounding head to keep him company. Not very good company, either. Idly he wondered where Merida had gone, more because he kind of wanted her to come back than because he was worried she might get in trouble. Having her there would be better than sitting alone, even if they didn't say anything.

With each passing moment he was feeling more pathetic.

He was just starting to wonder why he didn't pick up the pieces of himself and go upstairs, and crawl back into bed. It was an appealing prospect. But when his brain sent out the suggesting, his limbs sent the message back along with a refusal.

Something landed on the table harder than he would have liked, the vibrations passing through the table and to his brain.

"Ow."

"Drink this â€" it'll help," Merida said.

Jack cracked his eyes open to look at the mug she had just put down. From this angle, all he could see was delicate wafts of steam rising above the lip of the mug, before dissipating into the air. He started

at that for a moment, transfixed by the movement of the steam, before he looked at Merida. Her expression reminded him a little of Toothiana whenever she had given him some kind of medicine. Though Merida lacked Toothiana's motherly nature.

"What is it?" he asked warily. He didn't feel like going to all the effort of lifting his head off the table only to find out she'd poisoned him.

"Tea," she said. "My mum makes it for my dad whenever he drinks too much."

"I do not have a hangover," he snapped, a little offended.

"It'll still help."

Jack continued to stare at it, debating if he wanted to drink it or not. He was leaning toward not.

"Ah, stop bein' such a babby," she said, with a roll of her eyes. "I didn't poison it, if that's what you're afraid of."

That was enough to make him lift his head carefully from the table and pick up the mug. He took a cautious sniff and wrinkled his nose at the thick, bitter scent that met him. But Merida was watching him, a challenge in her quirked eyebrows, and he wasn't about to back down from that. He took a cautious sip, careful not to take too much of the hot liquid into his mouth.

He was glad, because the herbal bitterness set every taste bud on his tongue on edge, and it took a considerable amount of willpower to swallow it, rather than spit it back out. Even once it was down, he had to cough to clear the passage ways in his throat.

"Are you sure that's not poison?"

"Quite yer whinin'," Merida said, but she chuckled as she resumed her seat.

Jack looked into the mug of dark brown liquid, and took a deep breath as he braced himself to take another sip. It was still bitter, but this time he was ready, so it was bearable. "What is it?"

"Not sure," she admitted. "My mum mixes it herself. I took some when I was gettin' ready to leave."

Nodding, he took another drink. Still awful, but it had a floral aftertaste that wasn't so bad.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Why did you leave?" he asked, leaning against the back of his chair, now that his head was already off the table, and would have to stay that way to finish the tea. Once it was done, he would go back to bad. Whatever disaster would happen, it would either wake him up, or wait until he was rested. "I mean, I get the whole 'you didn't want to get married' thing â€" I don't really blame you for that. Couldn't you just have told your parents?"

"My mum wouldn't listen," she sighed. "She hasn't listened t' me in a long time. She's been too busy tellin' me what I can and can't do. 'A princess does this, a princess does not do that' â€" it feels like that's all she does: criticize what I'm not doin' right. And I don't do \_anythin'\_ right accordin' t' her. And she's more concerned with the kingdom than she is with me. I'm just her pawn in makin' sure we have peace."

Jack wanted to say he doubted thatâ€| but he didn't want to risk starting a fight.

"It's all about my responsibilities â€" and all I want is my freedom. I don't understand why that's so bad."

Jack paused with the mug next to his mouth. "I can understand that, actually."

That was exactly why he had left Warren â€" because he didn't want to accept his responsibilities as a Governor. Now, though, he wished he had just accepted it and done what he was supposed to. Accepting responsibility didn't seem so bad now, compared to where he was. He certainly wouldn't have this headache if he were still on Warren.

Absently he took a sip of tea, and immediately wished he hadn't. His throat constricted at the taste, and tried to cough it back up.

"Can I add honey or something?" he asked, looking over at Merida.

She shook her head.

"You're torturing me, aren't you?"

She smirked. And the expression was so similar to the one he would wear if their positions were reversedâ€| so he decided to just go along with it. He did wish he had his powers, though, he could have cooled the beverage so the torture wouldn't have to be drawn out in small sips, rather than a few quick gulps.

\*\*If any of you have ever taken Chinese herbal medicine, you can imagine what that tea tastes likeâ€| But, yeah. I had a horrible headache when I started working on this chapter, so it transferred onto poor Jack. I needed a way to torture him. Upping the stakes, and all that. \*\*

## 28. Chapter 28

\*\*One of those annoying chapters where the characters are supposed to be smarter than I am, which makes writing them rather difficult. \*\*

\*\*Then, just to make it more frustrating: I had writer's block for weeks. Then once I decided to just cut to the chase, I was able to slam it out in basically one sitting. \*\*

\*\*Also, I had to move the scar Jack mentioned in chapter 14. It was on his right arm, but I decided to move it to the right side of his

chest. Don't ask. It's just easier that way, because I say so.\*\*

\_Among The Stars\_

\_Chapter 28\_

"Hold still," Hiccup said, eyes fixed on the needle he was holding into the flame that flared from the match he held between his thumb and forefinger.

"Yeah, yeah," Jack muttered, teeth gritted as he leaned back into the pillows he'd piled against the headboard of his bed in the hotel room. Pain emanated from the horizontal, four inch gash that ran from just below the joint of his shoulder.

"You sure you don't wanna at least \_try\_ the pain killers?" Hiccup asked, as he took a seat on the edge of the bed and set about threading the needle.

Jack shook his head, not bothering to answer that question.

"How'd that happen?"

"Do closed doors not mean anything to you?" Jack opened his eyes to glare over at Merida, who once more stood in the doorway between the rooms.

"Would you turn on the light?" Hiccup asked, gesturing to the light switch near the door.

Merida complied, flooding the room with more light than was just coming through the window.

"Hold still," Hiccup muttered, as he slid the needle into the edges at the base of Jack's cut.

"OW!" He glared over at Merida. "Get out."

"I'm bored," she said with a smirk. "This is more entertainin' than sitting in my room."

Jack rolled his eyes, but had to close them again and bite down hard on his tongue as the needle pricked his skin. The feel of the thread being pulled tight was so strange it was hard not to shiver.

"What happened?" Merida asked. "And why aren't ya usin' pain killers?"

"Because they don't work on me," Jack said through gritted teeth. "And what happened was Ariel."

"What do ya mean?"

"Jim is currently avoiding his mother, for obvious reasons," he said. "He called and said he couldn't come home for lunch."

"He's just making it worse," Hiccup said.

Jack nodded in agreement. "Someone had the brilliant idea to send

Ariel to delivery his lunch. And like an idiot I offerred to go with her so she wouldn't get lost or anything. The girl is a complete space cadet."

"I noticed," Merida muttered.

"Yeah, well, that's the last time I try to be gallant," Jack said. His jaw clenched as the needle pricked his skin again, this one hurting a little more than the others. He didn't know why painkillers didn't work on his system, but sometimes it felt like yet another injustice heaped on him. "She's like a little kid â€" everything's new to her and she wants to see it all. On the way back we went into one of the shops, where she tripped over something and crashed into my back. I fell over, and when I reached out to try and catch myself I knocked a porcelain doll off a table. It broke, and when I hit the ground one of the pieces stabbed me in the shoulder. Hence â€" OW!"

"It's a good thing it wasn't bigger, so it didn't reach the muscle," Hiccup said, pulling another stitch tight.

Merida has left the doorway and come into the room to watch Hiccup work. "Where'd ya learn t' stitch room to stitch wounds?"

"During the war on Berk," Hiccup said, not looking up from the stitching. "Injuries were frequent, medics weren't."

"Oh." Merida fell silent.

No one spoke as Hiccup finished the last few stitches and tied off the thread. He set the needle on the nightstand, next to the burnt match. He ripped open a small packet holding a disinfectant cloth and used it to wipe off his the traces of Jack's blood from his hands.

"A porcelain doll?" she asked, quirking an eyebrow.

Jack didn't bother glancing over, instead glaring at the black stitches on his shoulder. "Nothing you say can possibly make me feel more pathetic, so don't even bother."

"Butâ€" "

"Merida, just don't," Hiccup said. He picked up the rolled bandage from the nightstand and went to work wrapping it around Jack's chest and shoulder.

Jack decided to be glad Merida actually listened to Hiccup and not worry about why.

With the bandage clipped in place, Jack collapsed back into the pillows of his bed. His shoulder still throbbed, and his lack of sleep from the nightbefore was catching up to him with a force he could no longer fight.

Hiccup and Merida were talking about something in the background, their voices a soft murmur Jack couldn't have deciphered if he wanted to. And he didn't want to. Sleep was too appealing in his current state. His eyes drifted closed, and everything faded to blissful darkness.



#

It was dark by the time he woke up, but it wasn't exactly blissful. Not with the way the pain in his shoulder washed over him the moment he returned to consciousness. Because of that it took a moment to readjust to the pain before he realized that wasn't what had woken him up. Instead, it was his instincts whispering to him that something was wrong. And the whisper was getting louder, which told him the danger was getting closer.

Jack closed his eyes again, hoping he was wrong. But he didn't fall asleep, and each passing heart beat reminded him of another reason why he knew he wasn't wrong. And each reason left him a little more awake. Until he knew there was no escaping it.

Taking a deep breath, bracing himself, he stood up. He but his tongue against the fresh wave of pain as the movement jarred his shoulder. But he pushed through, going over to the window to look out at the beach, in search of anything out of the ordinary. And he saw it immediately.

The sky was clear, stars shining out of the black night, and there wasn't any wind to speak of. But the ocean was tumultuous, the waves rising and cresting to rapid succession, practically right on top of each other. Beyond the waves, the water churned to white caps.

"That can't be good," he muttered. "Hiccup, get up."

He turned away from the window, and flicked on the overhead light as he went for his backpack.

"What is it?" Hiccup asked, with an alertness that could only come so fast to someone who had learned the hard way to sleep with one eye open.

"Whatever's happening is going down tonight," Jack said, throwing things out of his backpack into two piles "things that were in his way, and things he needed."

"You sure?" Even as Hiccup asked, he was getting out of bed and reaching for clothes he had laid out earlier.

"Look at the sea," Jack said, not looking up as he loaded a new energy pack into one of his blasters. He made sure everything was in place on his utility belt before he got dressed. Once he had pants on, he went over to the separating door and kicked it with a booted foot as he buckled on his belt. "Merida! Get up!"

"That doesn't make sense," Hiccup said from the window. "There's no reason"

"Get used to it," Jack said. He put his gauntlet on then reached for his shirt "light blue, with ultramarine trim on the hood. Once he'd pulled that on, he grabbed the blue and grey vest he'd been wearing for the past few days. He shrugged into it before he went back over to Merida's door.

He kicked it again, and then reached for the doorknob. It was supposed to be locked, but he wasn't surprised when it turned with no

resistance. "Get up."

He turned the light on and looked toward the bed, where Merida had buried her face in the pillow.

"We don't have time for this."

"Did ya hit yer head, Frost? It's still dark out!"

Jack ignored that and held up one of his blasters. "Can you use this?"

Heaven help him. He must be truly crazy if he was putting a blaster in the redhead's hands. But if this was big enough to get Eris' attention, he had a feeling they would need all the help they could get.

Merida blinked, stared at the blaster for a moment, then nodded.

"Don't make me regret this," he said, handing it to her. "Get dressed. We don't have much time."

"What'sâ€" "

"No time," he said. As he went back into the other room he zipped up his vest.

Hiccup was zipping up his own Jack as he passed through the door. "Do you have a plan?"

As soon as the question was asked he realized he probably should. But he'd never been good at planning.

"I'll improvise," he said. "I'll tell Sarah to evacuate the inn â€" you and Merida meet me on the beach."

"Right. And we're going to do what? Fight the ocean?"

That stopped him short.

"Do you have any reason \_why\_ they should evacuate? One that won't sound absolutely insane?"

Jack opened his mouth. But he had to close it again when nothing came out.

"If ya woke me up for no reason..." Merida didn't bother to finish the threat as she came in, fully dressed, with Jack's blaster strapped to her thigh.

The three looked at each other for a moment, none of them sure what to say while they tried to figure out what the others were thinking.

After a full minute (or two), Jack looked at Hiccup. "You're the captain."

"You're the one with the intuition, or whatever you wanna call it."

"Instincts â€" and they're not doing me much good at the moment. You're the smart one."

"Hey, I can start wars without trying," Hiccup said, an edge creeping into his voice. "but I think I've proved that ending them is a different matter!" The brokenness in his expression was enough to throw Jack off for a moment. "You were trained at the Academy. Didn't they teach you strategy or something?"

"They trained me to follow orders," Jack corrected. "They tried to, anyway."

Hiccup's mouth quirked in a dry smirk.

But they were still in the same position â€" a looming threat with no idea what it was or how to face it.

Jack racked his brain, searching for any idea what to do. He tried to remember if Bunnymund or North had given him any advice that could help in this situation. But he couldn't seem to call back anything they had taught him. Toothiana's lectures on oral hygiene came back, but those weren't going to be any help.

Hiccup started: "Maybe we canâ€" "

"Lads, ya may wanna take a look outside," Merida cut him off.

Despite her words, they both look at her, only to see that her eyes were wide, glued to the window, but now he turned around to look.

Storm clouds were brewing on the horizon, coming inland. The sea was still turbulent. Other than that, he didn't see what had Merida so transfixed. Then, as he watched, something reared up out of the water. At first he couldn't tell what it was. But as he watched, eyes as wide as Merida's, it reeled around and he realized it was a neck. Almost a hundred feet long, topped with a long, canine-like head. It was too far to see more details, but Jack was fairly sure its gaping mouth held a vicious set of teeth. As he continued to watch, the creature's tail whipped out of the white caps and slashed through the air. It was almost as long as the neck, and there was no hint how much of the body was still under water.

He looked back at Hiccup, just to be sure his friend saw it as well. Hiccup's wide eyes confirmed that he wasn't dreaming.

"Change of plans," Jack said, after he'd swallowed down the lump in her throat. "You guys start the evacuation. I'll find Ariel and see what she knows."

\*\*Short, but I thought it was a good place to wrap up this chapter.  
\*\*

## 29. Chapter 29

\*\*Okay, the last chapter. Sorry it took so longâ€" there were problems. (Job, work, stress, lifeâ€" my inability to write fights

against giant sea monstersâ€¦) Okay, yeah, justâ€¦ Enjoy?\*

Jack was light years beyond courtesy or consideration when he reached Jim's door and slammed his knuckles against the hard wood a few times. He didn't even hear Toothiana in his head, lecturing him on civility. For all the fairy queen's refinement, she understood war as well as any of them. And he was pretty sure pounding on someone's door was allowed in this situation.

After a moment without response, he knocked again.

Finally, Jim answered the door. "Whatâ€¦"

"Where's Ariel?" Jack cut him off. Pleasantries were also waived. In his book, at least.

"Not here!" Jim said, visibly incensed at when he perceived as an accusation.

"Not my question," Jack snapped. "Where is she?"

The door next to Jim's opened and Sarah looked out. "What's going on?"

"There's a sea serpent off the coast, headed this way. You need to evacuate the inn. And youâ€¦" he rounded back on Jim "â€¦need to tell me where Ariel is. Now."

"I'm right here.

Jack looked over to see her coming out of a door further down the hall, dressed in a pink nightgown. "Great. Best good news I've had all night. Now can you tell me why there's a sea serpent outside?"

"W-what?" He was getting really tired of that wordâ€¦ but the way her face paled told Jack she had heard him.

And he was running out of patience. "Sea serpent. In the bay. Why?"

She ducked her head, red hair hiding her face, and Jack really wished he were on any other planet.

"It's probably here to take me home," she said, gripping the fabric of her nightgown in her small hands.

Jack frowned.

If it were that simple, it wouldn't have gotten Eris' attention. A couple sea serpents showing up to take a mermaid home, even if they terrorized a city, wasn't big enough. Eris only showed up if there was going to be property damage, at the very least.

At the thought of Eris, her words came back to him and his eyes widened as the pieces began to click in his head.

"They think you've been kidnapped," he said, not taking his eyes off the mermaid â€" who didn't look up.

Eris had said she was waiting for someone to make a stupid mistake that would cause tense political relations to fall apart. Ariel had mentioned while they were in town that her father was none-too-fond of humans. And running away was something he was starting to categorize as a 'stupid mistake'.

"You're gotta be kidding." He continued to stare at the mermaid. "You ran away to be with your boyfriend and now your people areâ€¦ what? Declaring war on the surface?" His voice rose in volume with each word, anger bubbling dangerously close to the surface.

"Hey!" Jim snapped, stepping between Jack and Ariel. "Leave her alone."

"This from someone who's never seen war," Jack muttered. He spared a quick glare at the younger man, then looked past him back to the mermaid. "Is that what's happening?"

Her eyes were clenched, possibly fighting back tears, as she nodded

Jack's glare faded a little, his thoughts a whirl as he continued to fit the pieces together in search of the full picture. Because something was still missing. He wasn't fond of politics, but he understood them. The other governors had seen to that.

"You have to be important," he said, thinking out loud. Jim and Sarah both stared at him. "Your people have done such a good job of hiding for three hundred years. They're not going to throw that away because one little mermaid goes missing. You're been gone less than three days and they're already declaring war. What are you, Ariel?"

Of course she said the one thing he really hoped she wouldn't say. Of course.

"I'm the youngest daughter of King Triton."

"A princess." Jack shook his head. "Typical."

"What?" Jim's stare turned onto Ariel. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it mattered."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Don't book the church yet," he muttered, then turned back to Ariel before Jim could say anything else. "If this is personal, your father will be part of it, right?"

"Probably."

"Then all we have to do is get you two at the table and maybe we canâ€¦" he couldn't believe what he was about to say. "Maybe we can negotiate."

He didn't choke on the words. That seemed like a small miracle at the moment.

Before he could take a step in any direction his commlink chimed. Taking a deep breath he pulled the device from his belt.

"Please tell me you have good news," he said, rubbing his

forehead.

"There's another one," Hiccup said.

For a moment Jack just stared at the commlink, wondering if he could wake up and this would all be a dream.

"Hiccup, we need to discuss your definition of 'good'."

"After we talk about our life choices," Hiccup countered. "Now get down here. You're the best fighter we've got."

#

Jack stopped talking and stretched across the foot of the bed, loosening the muscles of his back and legs, which had started to tense up from lying still.

The air of the bedroom was looser than he would have liked, personally. But he had given control of the thermostat to Rapunzel. So the thin layer of frost that spread across the blue comforter wherever his skin touched it lasted only a moment before it melted to nothing.

He picked two grapes from the bowl in the middle of the bed, tossing one in the air and catching it in his mouth. His teeth broke the skin with a satisfying \_crunch\_ and the juice exploded over his tastebuds.

He was halfway through the second grape when Rapunzel, who had been sitting against the headboard, leaned forward.

"Well?"

Jack swallowed the grape and stretched out again, hands behind his head. He was probabwly having too much fun. "Well, what?"

"What happened?"

Jack took a deep breath, then jumped to his feet. "Dunno."

He raised his arms above his head, stretching the oblique muscles.

Yup. Too much fun. It was a good thing his wife was behind him, so she couldn't see his grin.

"You don't know?"

He glanced back to see her green eyes were wide.

"But, you saidâ€¦ the scar on your leg!"

He grinned that she caught that detail. It had been months since they'd gone over his scars. And considering how emotional that night had been, he hadn't known how much she remembered.

"Concussion." He pretended to hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Actually, it was the back of my head. The last thing I remember is getting that call from Hiccup, then I woke up three days

later. Hiccup says I grabbed onto one of the sea serpent's horns, but it threw me against the cliff face."

"And you don't remember any of it?"

He shook his head. "A few flashes, but they're muddled to say the least. And I think some of them are dreams I had while I was out. Which has to be a new level of pathetic, even for me. At 21 I'd had amnesia twice " or however you say it."

Rapunzel giggled, and Jack felt himself smile in response.

Expelling the air from his lungs, he sat back on the edge of the bed, this time closer to her.

"Here's what I've been told."

Rapunzel scooted closer to him, until their knees brushed. Absently Jack fingers of lock of her endless gold hair.

"There were three monsters total " a serpent, something that looks like a weird water wolf, and a giant lobster called a Leviathan. I vaguely remember that one, but that might be because they showed me a picture later. That's the one I went after. I don't know details, since Hiccup and Merida were preoccupied. Apparently I killed it and went to help Hiccup, who was fighting the serpent. Which lead to my concussion. I hit the cliff face then fell into the water. I was out cold by the time Merida dragged me to shore, and I didn't wake up for three days. Apparently she sat Triton and Ariel down and negotiated an agreement between them. At the time I didn't believe it, but I've seen her negotiate since then. She's good."

"So are you," Rapunzel said, bumping his leg with her knee.

Jack shrugged. "I'm passable. My wife's amazing, though. Makes me look pathetic."

She giggled, and blushed modestly.

"Anyway. Triton called off the war, Ariel and Jim didn't have to break up. For all I know, they're living happily ever after."

"You never checked up on them?"

Jack shook his head. "We never do. I mean, it's not something we talked about and decided: we just don't. Probably because all three of us were running away." He took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. "You don't usually go back even a step, since you're afraid of getting pulled back all the way."

"It's a good thing I didn't let you out of my sight," Rapunzel whispered. "You could have slipped through my fingers."

"Nah." Jack lifted their hands to press his lips against her knuckles. "I'd already stopped running by the time we got to Corona. I was just trying to hold onto you."

"Hack" Her expression told him she was available for a kiss, and he leaned forward to kiss her briefly.

"Triton honored me for killing his pet lobster," he said, when he pulled back. "The leviathan was supposedly the deadliest creature in the oceans, so he said killing it was an act of valor."

"You sound surprised."

"I killed his deadliest weapon, and he said I was a hero."

"You are," Rapunzel said.

"I killed his lobster."

Rapunzel laughed under her breath, leaning forward to kiss him again. They lingered longer this time, and he suspected she was wordlessly telling him they'd been talking too long. He was inclined to agree, but after a minute he pulled back.

"You know the part I really wish I remembered?"

"Hmm?"

"Hiccup says I crawled inside the Leviathan."

At that her eyes opened, and she looked at him with sufficient surprise. "What?"

He nodded. "It had an armored hide. Hiccup says I went through a cut in its side and walked up the throat, and out of the mouth after it was dead."

Rapunzel paled, and he thought he saw a note of revulsion in her eyes.

"I really wish I knew what in the universe I was thinking. There's gotta be a better way to kill a lobster. Though that's probably why I never got the smell of dead fish out of my clothes."

Rapunzel reached out to touch the scar on his right arm — the reminder that he'd been injured by a porcelain doll. He still wasn't sure how he could ever live that one down.

"What about Merida?"

"Mostly uninjured. Hiccup's arm got cut up a little."

"I \_mean\_, how did she end up staying."

"She begged."

"I have a hard time picturing that."

"Normally, I would too," Jack agreed. "But, considering everything that happened while we were there, I can understand why she wouldn't want to stay. Not to mention Hiccup followed my suggestion — too soon. She helped wait tables the three days I was out. Like I said, she was begging to leave — she was just begging Hiccup, not her parents."

"At least you know it would have worked," Rapunzel said.



"That did make me feel better," he admitted. "At first I thought maybe we'd just keep her around for a few weeks, then Hiccup would be responsible, or she'd get homesick." He picked up another grape, glaring at it. "It figured out pretty quick \_that\_ wasn't gonna happen."

"Poor thing," Rapunzel giggled.

"Eventurally I was more concerned with getting them together before I chocked on the sexual tension. It took them three years, Rapunzel. Of course, once they started dating it was only three or four months before they got married. I was caught between 'finally' and 'isn't that a little fast?'"

"What about Eris?"

Jack shook his head. "Gone by the time we reached orbit. I've only seen her a few times since then. I got the impression she doesn't find me as interesting as she used to. Last time I saw her was on Asgard, and she didn't even talk to me."

"I'm glad."

"Me, too," he said. He took a handful of grapes, eating them while he waited for Rapunzel's next question. Though it wasn't what he expected.

"What happened to the \_Stormfly\_?"

Jack was surprised how much thatâ€¦ hurt. It had been a while since he thought about the \_Stormfly\_. He sighed, looking down at the grape he was rolling between his thumb and forefinger.

"Destroyed," he said, the word barely making it past the lump in his throat. "It'sâ€¦ a really long story. For another time. But, to summarize, we were on Maldonia for shore leaveâ€¦"

"Ambassador Naveen's planet?"

Jack nodded.

"You were the ones who helped stopped the uprising two years ago?"

"It was more of a power struggle, but yeah: that was us. And here's where it all starts to come around full circle, really. We ran into Naveen while we were on Maldonia, and he invited us to stay with him. He insisted he still owed me for saving his daughter. You already know what happened when the rebellion attacked the city, I'm guessing. They destroyed most of the ships in the city to prevent any of the nobles getting off world. The \_Stormfly\_ was one of them."

"Oh, Jackâ€¦ I'm sorry," she whispered.

Jack shrugged. They had all been hit hard. Their home, the one thing that let all of them keep running, had been destroyed before their eyes in a ball of flames so hot they'd felt it even from a hundred feet away.

"And Hiccup," Rapunzel realized. "The ship his father gave him."

Jack nodded. "It was his last connection to home. But the timing is what gets me. Because he and Merida had their first date a couple of nights early. And I always suspected he didn't want to admit how he felt about her because he was afraid to betray Astrid's memory."

"After everything settled down, Naveen offered to help us pay for a new ship. We didn't really want to accept, but we didn't have much choice. A few days later a Berk Mystery Class was delivered, and Hiccup named itâ€¦" he held a hand up, indicating for her to finish the sentence.

"The \_Night Fury\_."

"The \_Night Fury\_," he repeated. "About sixteen months before we found you. Which is a good thing, because I never could have hidden you in my shower on the \_Stormfly\_. So it all worked out in the end."

THE END

\*\*January 20th, 2014, 9:45pm\*\*

\*\*I just finished \*\*\_\*\*Among The Stars\*\*\_\*\*. As soon as I wrote THE END, and closed my notebook, I was struck with a strange hollowness. I've been working on ATS for the past 6 months, not including the initial one shot during Jackunzel week. For a story that was supposed to be four or five chapters (and probably should have stopped at 19), this has become a huge part of my life. \*\*

\*\*And it's been absolutely incredible. I feel like I writing has improved exponentially, and I've met so many wonderful people. Both people who commented or reviewed a few times, and others who have become dear friends \*\*

\*\*Admittedly, the Atlantis Arc spiraled into a disaster that I deeply regret. But I think I learned a valuable lesson, and I'm glad that I pushed through it. I wanted to give you guys more for the finally, but I literally had no idea what to do for a sea monster battle. I sat with writer's block for weeks before I finally settled on this ending. \*\*

\*\*So, thank to everyone who stayed with me to this point.\*\*

\*\*Love, Song Of A Free Heart\*\*

## 30. Chapter 30

For all of you who have been asking that I write more, I've finally started the sequel: \_Counting Stars\_.

End  
file.